

MADE IN SHANGHAI

A
European's
interpretation
on
Chinese
fashion heritage

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Abstract

The thesis consists of both a theoretic written part, and a productive part. The written part examines Chinese garments from the end of the Qing-dynasty, as well as the dressing culture of today's China. The thesis subjects are looked into through the gaze of a European. The productive part consists of a womenswear collection of six looks designed with the results of the theoretic study in mind. The written part looks through the achievements of Chinese garment industry and the problems within, while also examining the Western world's regard for it. The thesis also questions the overuse of plastic and considers the possibility of cultural appropriation. The final collection presents the ideas risen from the written study.

The thesis starts off with research about Chinese clothing manufacturing, the Qing-dynasty dress and some handcraft techniques related to them. The research focuses on late 19th century imperial wardrobe, and the modern Qipao-dress of the 20th century. Furthermore, the subject of contemporary Chinese consumerism is looked into, and the loss of a garment's value in today's China. It is emphasized, that any opinions and conclusions are from a European's point of view and are entirely the writer's own.

The clothing collection is produced simultaneously as the theoretical research. It presents the traditional Chinese handcraft techniques and is realized in simple silhouettes that borrow the shape from Qing-dynasty dress. The patterns of the dress have been modernized and exaggerated to present contemporary China. The main material used in the collection is plastic Christmas tinsel, that is either cutting waste or donated warehouse dead-stock from a Finnish Christmas ornament factory. The shiny surfaces of the garments made of this plastic material refer to a false sense of luxury, as seen in the illegal designer copies in Shanghai's street markets.

The objective of the thesis is, how to borrow elements from another culture in a dignified way as to avoid cultural appropriation. Understanding the importance of this issue is highlighted in the thesis, and as well as how important it is to be able to use other cultures as design inspirations. The meaning of garment design through history is also considered in the thesis, and how authentic design is as important as the materials used to create something that lasts centuries.

The result of the written part of the thesis shows a basic overview of Chinese Qing-dynasty fashion history, and contemporary Chinese design and production. The productive part of the thesis presents an alternative way to showcase the historical Chinese heritage, in the form of contemporary fashion design. The final collection is presented as an objection to the flooding European luxury brand copycats of China.

Keywords fashion, China, Qing-dynasty, plastic, waste, plagiarism, collection



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Tiivistelmä

Opinnäytetyö koostuu sekä kirjallisesta, että produktiivisesta osuudesta. Kirjallinen osuus käsittelee Kiinan Qing-dynastian aikaista pukeutumista, sekä nykyajan Kiinan kulutuskulttuuria länsimaalaisen silmin. Produktiivinen osuus koostuu kuuden asun naisten vaate mallistosta, joka on suunniteltu teoreettisen tutkimustyöhön perustuen. Kirjallisessa osuudessa läpikäydään Kiinan vaateollisuuden saavutuksia ja ongelmakohtia, sekä sitä, kuinka Kiinan vaate- ja tekstiiliteollisuutta on käsitelty Läntisessä maailmassa. Lisäksi opinnäytetyössä kyseenalaistetaan muovin liikakäyttöä, sekä tutkitaan kulttuurin omimista. Lopullinen vaatemallisto esittelee kuuden asun kokonaisuuden, jossa havainnollistetaan kirjallisessa osuudessa nousseet ajatukset.

Opinnäytteen alussa esitellään teoreettista taustatutkimusta kiinalaisesta vaateollisuudesta sekä Qing-dynastian pukeutumisesta ja käsityötekniikoista. Tutkimus on rajattu 1800-luvun lopun keisarikuntaan pukuihin, sekä 1900-luvun perinteiseen Qipao-pukuun. Lisäksi opinnäytetyössä käydään lyhyesti läpi nykyajan kiinan kulutuskulttuuria ja vaatesuunnittelua. Opinnäytetyössä pohditaan vaatteiden merkityksen katoamista, mikä on erityisen silmiinpistävää Kiinassa. Tutkimuksessa korostetaan, että johtopäätelmät ovat Eurooppalaisen näkökulmasta, ja ovat kirjoittajan omia.

Teoreettisen taustatyön välissä syntynyt vaatemallisto kuvastaa Kiinan historian loistokkaita käsityömenetelmiä sekä selkeitä siluetteja. Kaavat ovat otettu suoraan Qing-dynastian aikaisista puvuista, ja niitä on modernisoitu sekä paisutettu kuvastamaan nykyajan Kiinaa. Vaatteiden materiaalina on suurilta osin käytetty muovista joulunauhaa, jotka ovat joulunauhatehtaan leikkuujätettä, sekä luovutettuja varasto-kappaleita. Muovimateriaalin kiiltävät pinnat viittaavat vääristyneeseen kuvaan luksuksesta, joka yhtälailla syntyy Shanghain katu markettien luksus brändi -koppioista.

Opinnäytetyössä etsitään vastausta kysymyseen, voiko vieraasta kulttuurista ottaa vaikutteita vaatemallistoon arvokkaasti, ilman että se koettaisiin kulttuurin omimiseksi? Opinnäytetyössä pohditaan myös, mitä keinoja tämän kompastuskiven välttämiseen on, ja mitä jokaisen suunnittelijan tulisi ymmärtää. Opinnäytetyössä korostetaan, että eri kulttuureista lainaaminen on tärkeää, kun se on oikein tehty. Lisäksi opinnäytetyössä pohditaan vaateen merkitystä historiasta nykypäivään, ja kuinka vaateen materiaalin lisäksi suunnittelun autenttisuus on yhtä lailla tärkeää kestävän tuotteen luomiseksi.

Kirjallisen työn lopputulos esittelee pintapuolisen katsauksen Kiinan Qing-dynastian puku historiaan, sekä nykypäivän kulutus kulttuuriin. Produktiivinen osuus esittelee mahdollisen vaihtoehdon esittää Kiinan historiaa nyky designin muodossa, vastalauseena Kiinan loputtomille Euroopan muotitalojen kopioijille.

Avainsanat muoti, Kiina, Qing-dynastia, muovi, jäte, plagiointi, mallisto

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1.

Introduction of the topic

In the spring of 2018, I did an internship for a Chinese fashion brand in Shanghai. As I have always been curious of the garments of foreign cultures, this was a perfect opportunity for me to learn and have a hands-on experience in Chinese fashion culture. The two months I spent working for a foreign company and learning their ways, I had both inspiring and confusing experiences and they raised questions beyond my expectations. The Chinese culture, full of extremes, was very eye-opening for me in both positive and negative regards. This is the reason I wanted to further study Chinese fashion and history, and eventually create my final collection around this subject.

For my thesis topic, I wanted to address the issues in Chinese fashion design and production and to create a culturally appropriate collection based on Chinese culture from a non-native's point of view. For me, one of the main interests in fashion design has always been the impact of different cultures in the history of the Western wear, as well as in general. This includes the traditional garments from different foreign cultures, and specifically from a historic point of view. Because I am focusing in my thesis on Chinese culture, the inspiration from my collection comes from Chinese historical traditional wear, from the end-period of Qing-dynasty to the beginning of the 20th century.

For the collection, I also wanted to include the global problem of plastic waste. This is a topic that is very much spoken all over the world in an increasing amount and it just happens that China is one of the countries where the plastic problem is on a dangerous level (see image 14). Disposable plastics, even in the form of clothing, are taking over the world. Delicate, hand-made clothing and beautiful traditional wear is replaced with meaningless and endless amount of designer fakes and fast-fashion. Because of this, the garments have lost their value over the years, and this problem is especially visible in China.

The outcome of my thesis is a written study of Chinese Fashion industry and the problems within. Based on the research, as another outcome of my thesis I designed and realized a womenswear collection of six looks. The collection is based on my personal idea of how fashion should take a step back and slow the pace of the industry, as well as add meaning to the garments which are produced.

Interpretations and conclusions in this thesis are entirely my own, as are any factual mistakes or shortcomings. My thesis is intended for anyone interested in fashion, history and culture, but especially for those interested in Chinese culture and sustainability.

1.1 Research question

My research question is - how to create a collection with visual references borrowed from another culture, while taking into consideration the possibility of cultural appropriation? In addition, I considered how to take into account the unsustainable aspect of plastic and plastic waste, and use that material for a positive outcome.

Not so long ago, almost every fashion designer took inspiration for their work from foreign cultures and interpreted them as they pleased. In today's world that is not possible anymore. Because of social media and the growing concern of equality, exploiting a foreign culture is not acceptable.

Sustainability requirements within companies are growing all the time and every successful company is expected to think about the environment and the sustainable future. All the waste in the form of clothing I have encountered recently have raised my awareness of the polluting matter as a designer. As a young fashion student, I want to find a way to give a contribution to the future through my designs.

1.2 Objective of the thesis

Some cultural habits, artifacts and garments are sacred for the ones who use them in their traditional celebrations or worship rituals. To take these items and to use them in a context that insults or decreases the value of the item, is a very delicate matter for some cultures. At this time and age, we should already know better not to take advantage of certain things. We need to be able to educate ourselves and others to make the world a better place for everyone.

Because my thesis is based on Chinese culture, my objective is to educate myself with this subject of cultural appropriation and I want to show an example, how certain things are made while taking the important values into consideration. I want to be able to use inspiration from different cultures, so my aim is to understand how to do it in a correct way and avoid being misinterpreted as derogatory when using another heritage than my own as a design inspiration. I also want to understand the differences between European and Chinese fashion market, design and branding.

What comes to the collection, the objective is to have a storytelling concept, both artistically ambitious and possibly thought provoking. I intended to emphasize the traditional artisanship and aesthetics related to Chinese culture, both historical and contemporary. I wanted to use traditional elements in a way that creates a mix of cultures and eras – traditional Chinese craftsmanship in comparison to contemporary fashion market.

I wish to emphasize, that I am by no means an expert of Chinese culture, no matter how much research I would ever do on the subject. To fully understand the subject of my thesis, the research material could take me a lifetime to go through. My knowledge comes from the study I have made and my two-month experience in Shanghai as a European fashion student. While my aim is to avoid cultural appropriation, I will study Chinese clothing history and the changes of it with both an admiring and a critical point of view. In the end, the goal of my thesis is to promote the gorgeous and complex past of Chinese dress, and what the Chinese clothing industry would be capable of doing today.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

In the following written part of the thesis, I will go through the focus points of the research. To begin with, I present my previous works and how they connect to my thesis collection. For the theoretic part I look into the background of the subject of my thesis, from current Chinese fashion industry to the Qing-dynasty China. I present the dominating dress-styles in close historical China and the Western world's regard for it. I briefly go through the problematics of cultural appropriation, as well as plastic waste. As a conclusion, I present the resulting clothing collection based on my research and analyze the general outcome.

2.

Previous collections

When I am designing, many decisions are instinctive. I don't believe in doing things in a very calculated way. In my opinion, whatever you work with, it needs to be honest and something that genuinely interests you, in order to create something conspicuous and believable.

When I choose a theme for a collection, it has to be something that I haven't seen in a while. Choosing an aesthetic concept to my work, that is already discussed or trendy, would be something I would never do. To me it is interesting to focus on things that aren't trendy at all and find a way to transform them into something that is considered as beautiful and interesting.

I have had a combining element of historical references in all my previous collections. In the spring of 2014, I collaborated on a menswear project, realized with Marianne El-Khoury and Ines Kalliala, on the second year of my BA studies. (See Image 1.) This collection referenced the late 19th century, drawing inspiration from a Swedish director Ingmar Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* (1982). At this time, sport elements in menswear were almost unavoidable, so it felt natural to do a collection that leans heavily on mainly historical and tailored clothing references instead of sporty ones.



Image 1. Menswear project



Image 2. Bachelor's graduate collection," Night Out"

The first fully realized collection of my own, my bachelor's graduate collection called "Night Out," (see image 2) referenced 1980's and 1990's horror and slasher films with teenage protagonists. Classic movies of this period's horror genre, such as *Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1981), *Sleepaway Camp* (Robert Hiltzik, 1983) and *Friday 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980) were all referenced to give the general mood to the collection. The female protagonist of this collection was the "final girl" in the previously mentioned horror films. My aim was to have the garments of the collection to give nostalgia - to have something we all recognize - with typical teenage girl wardrobe. The garments had a transforming effect, as if the protagonist of the collection had run through a woods with horrors within.

On my second year of my MA studies, I made a womenswear collection “Vegas Housewife”. (Image 3) This collection was based on a fictional story of a 1950’s housewife, who wants to flee from her monotonous housewife lifestyle to become a Las Vegas showgirl. Her clothing references the conservative wear of a 50’s housewife, which have been mended with lace, tulle and embroidery to become something flashier and daring. The “Vegas Housewife” collection was not presented in the annual Näytös-fashion show, as my previous collections were. However, this collection was later presented in an exhibition in Helsinki Design Week, which turned out to be a good alternative way to present a collection, as the mood of the collection could be shown through a specific kind of installation.



Image 3. Womenswear collection,” Vegas Housewife”

As I have mentioned before, for my thesis collection I'm also looking into historic references. For me, the past seems like the most interesting starting point for a collection research. After all, in fashion everything seems to be already done in one way or another. It is simply about interpreting the past in a new way, and creating new, interesting stories while finding new perspective, provoking thoughts or showing another point of view to look at things we are familiar with. This time my idea was to pick something unfamiliar to myself, yet fascinating, and interpret it to fit today's visuals and values.

3.

Theoretic background

The theoretic part of this thesis consists of several themes. I used books and on-line articles as a starting point for my study, and in addition, looked into previous MA thesis works. This followed with studying the current fashion market in China and familiarizing myself with Qing-dynasty garments and their meanings. I observed the cultural interaction between the East and the West and made sure that I understand the importance cultural appropriation. Finally, I looked into the contemporary fashion design in China and considered the issue of plastic pollution.

3.1 The review of literature

During the process of search for references, I found several articles that address the Western effect on contemporary Chinese fashion market and vice versa, as well as how Chinese fashion is presented through the eye of the Western media.

A good general review for the history of Imperial Chinese clothing is found from a publication called *Imperial Wardrobe*, written by Gary Dickinson and Linda Wrigglesworth (1990). The book presents a good overview of Qing-dynasty court dress. Colors, symbols and shapes of the court dresses are explained in the book in a detailed way, demonstrating that in an imperial court dress, nothing was undeliberate.

A book written by Adam Geczy called "Fashion and Orientalism" reviews hundreds of years of history of eastern Asian influence on western fashion. In his book, Geczy points out a variety of instances, in extreme detail, that the western wear has taken elements from Chinese textile and fashion history, and how many things we may consider western inventions are in fact from Asian origin.

In addition, to get myself more familiar with the Eastern fabrics, The book called "The Story of Silk" by Liu Zhijuan, gave me a good basis of the materials used in historical China - The history of the material, how it has been used and what was the symbolism behind it.

An aesthetic starting point for my collection were Chinese stories and films. About these sources, I will elaborate later in my research.

3.2 Chinese fashion industry

Observing China's garment and textile industry's history, it's easy to see that the craft of clothing making in China has been existing on a skilled level throughout centuries. However, while China makes a growing portion of the world's clothes today, I feel that after the so-called Westernization, Chinese have lost their traditional values and taste over the years. The phrase "Made in China" immediately means to many consumers fake products and bad quality. Even if it's generalizing a whole nation's production of goods, the negative connotation of that simple phrase is hard to shake off. My personal view of the matter is that Chinese do not seem to appreciate their heritage enough. Because of the massive number of fake products made and sold in China every day, and the lack of well-produced original design garments, things produced in China are reduced to indicate endless number of cheap rip-offs.

With all the know-how the Chinese have, why are they so behind with their fashion industry? China is famously known for their fashion manufacturing, but they are still missing their own big fashion brands.

These days, millennials in China are more interested in individualism and are heavily influenced by Western brands and style. Chinese fashion companies are still struggling to find a way to appeal to the younger generation. Some of the Chinese companies are market leaders, such as Huawei and Alibaba, but there is not a single fashion brand yet to reach the same positioning. The purchasing power of millennials is growing and if China doesn't keep up, it is getting more and more difficult to compete with the competition coming from the West. (Zha, 2019)

Of course, nothing is black and white, and there are already locally successful brands in some of Shanghai's luxury department stores. Some domestic designers are presented next to their Western competitors, such as Ms Min, Ming Ma and Angel Chen. In the luxury stores, they are neck to neck with Stella McCartney, Calvin Klein and Diane Von Furstenberg. These Chinese designers have studied in some of the best European fashion design schools, which could be one of the reasons why they have successfully challenged the Western brands. (Okutsu & Fang, 2019)

The purchasing power is growing in China every year, making the market more and more desirable for both international and domestic brands. (Image 4.) Already for some European luxury brands, the main customer market is China, since Chinese consumers are covering a third of the global luxury shoppers. (Togoh, 2019).

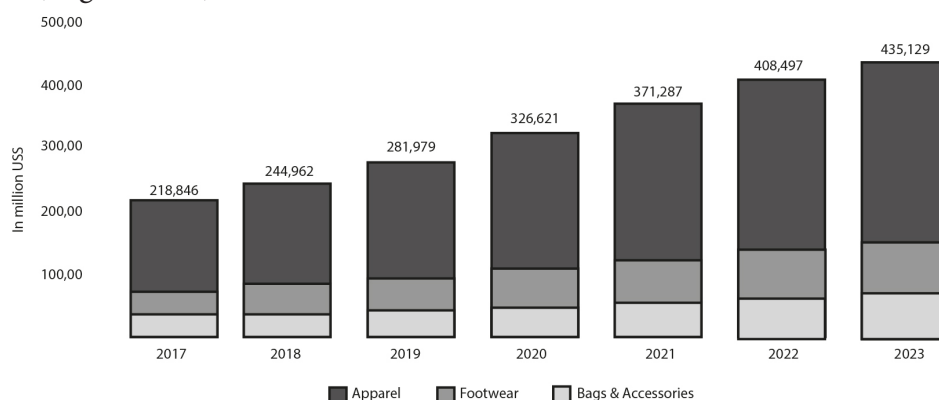


Image 4. The growing market revenue in China (Statista.com)

3.3 Qing-dynasty

Chinese fashion history covers thousands of years and within the limits of this research, it is impossible to look over everything. I decided to focus on the most known dresses and formal wear during Qing-dynasty (1644-1911), which gave me the most inspiration and was most instantly recognizable.

The Qing-dynasty began with the rule of the Manchu-tribe, in 1644. The new empire was called Qing, which means “pure”. During Qing-dynasty, China reached its greatest size yet. For establishing control over the Han-Chinese, the Manchu emperors decided that their language, customs and way of dress was to be adapted by the whole population. Over centuries, more regulations were set for the correct way of dressing for formal and semi-formal clothing. Garments indicated the social status as well as political power. Even the color of the garment made a difference in creating a certain image.

3.3.1 Chinese Fashion history of Qing-dynasty

The silhouette of Chinese historic garments has varied throughout centuries. The most distinct version of a traditional Chinese dress is that of the Manchu-tribe. The official dress of Qing-dynasty borrowed features of Manchu-tribe and changed substantially from the traditional dress of Han-Chinese, which had not developed noticeably for thousands of years. (Wilson, 1986)

The Manchu Court dress (chao fu) was the official formal wear of the dynasty. It consisted of the robe, a collar, hat, necklace, girdle and boots. The boots were knee-length, and the leg-part was longer than necessary to have it fold around the ankles. They were often made of satin and covered in pearls and coral beads. Leather and felted paper were used to make the 7 cm high soles. (Garrett, 1994)

While being similar with Japanese and Korean traditional dresses, Chinese traditional garments are more flared and often have a narrower sleeve cut. Manchu dress was more fitted, with slimmer sleeves and big side slits. The number of slits was determined based on the rank of the wearer. The royal family had four slits on all sides of the dress, whereas officials and the rest of the population had two slits. (Wilson, 1986)

The most distinct differences from many other East Asian traditional dresses are the method of closure, as well as the sleeve ends. Traditional Chinese robe closes across the front. (See image 5). An extra piece of cloth is seamed vertically with the bodice part of the robe, overlapping from the center to the right side. The edge is usually covered by a band that continues to the neckline. The dress is fastened in the front with knotted buttons and loop closures (pankou), and down the right side of the dress. All Manchu dresses had round neckline and a right-side fastening. The sleeve ends were often curved in “horse hoof” cuffs. This was originally fashioned to protect the hands when riding a horse and remained as a feature to cover the hands in formal events, as it was impolite for them to be exposed. (Garrett, 1994) One main feature in the official Manchu dress was an outer, shorter jacket with front-fastening and wider sleeves. (Wilson, 1986)

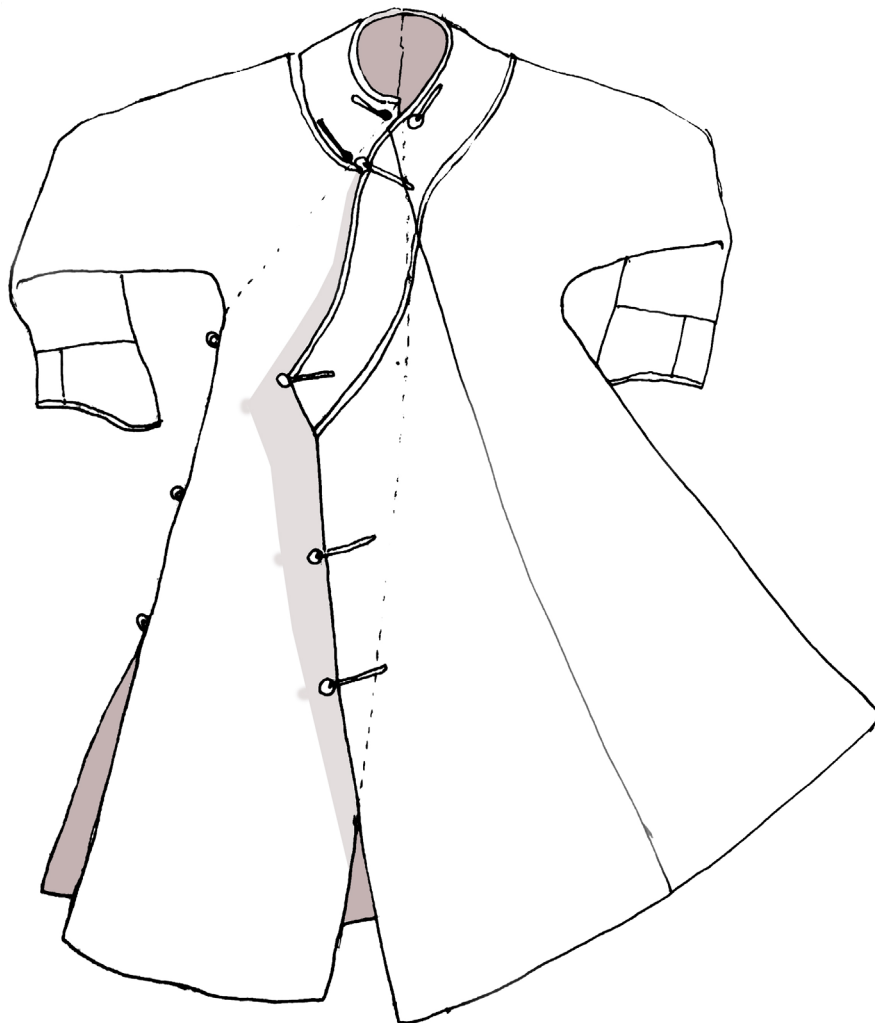


Image 5.
Closing method of a Qianglong period “Ten thousand pearl”
dragon silk robe, Qing-dynasty (1644-1911)

3.3.2 The imperial dragon robe

The dragon robe (Image 6) was used only by Chinese emperors in festivities as well as at work. The emperor could however grant a permission to an official of his choosing to wear it as well. In such instances, one of the dragon's claws were to be removed. The dragon robe was worn with a crown, and like chao pao, the full-length court robe worn as part of chao fu, it was worn with a belt made of jade, and a bead necklace. (Dickinson, G. 1990)

Imperial Wardrobe (Dickinson, 1990) introduces the most formal costume of the official wardrobe called chao fu. Said dress can be translated to 'court dress', 'robes of state or 'audience robes', and was perhaps the most important type in Qing costumes.

The design of the dragon has been through changes in its history of over 5000 years. The color scale however has remained narrow. During Tang-dynasty, it became forbidden for anyone but the emperor to wear yellow, and it stayed that way until the end of the last dynasty in 1911. (Dickinson, G. 1990)



Image 6. Navy blue Imperial Dragon robe with embroidery in gold thread. Late Qing-dynasty.

In ceremonial dresses there were two main types: ritual- and court robe. In the ritual robe, there were four golden dragon figures on a dark blue background, placed in the shoulders, chest and back. They were often surrounded by symbols of the sun, moon, clouds and long life. The court robe was to be worn in front of the public. A specific blue robe was worn at ceremonial events in the temple of heaven, a red robe while praying for the sun, and a pale blue while praying for the moon. The festive robes of the emperor were for other uses, such as birthdays. (Dickinson, G. 1990)

The empress' dresses were likewise categorized for ritual as well as festive purposes. Her court robes were, as well, bright yellow, with dark blue details. In some instances, the empress' robes were decorated with pleats on the waist. Besides court robe, the empress wore court skirts and a court vest, that were both worn on top of the court robe. (Dickinson, 1990)

The robes were constructed with the most valuable materials available, such as silk, fur, gold, pearls and diamonds. (See Image 7.) A robe of a Qing-dynasty emperor has stayed intact for over 300 years, as the embroidery has been made with 99,9% of pure gold thread, as well as peacock feathers. Because the materials were expensive and difficult to obtain, a dragon robe of this caliber would take at least a year to produce. (Dickinson, 1990)

The Imperial court robes were commissioned on annual basis by the board of rituals. The materials utilized in the dress were checked twice, once when they came off the loom, and second time in the Imperial silk store. The sketches of the patterns were first painted on the fabric to show to weavers and embroiderers. By the end of the 19th century, the cost of Imperial robes was between 3000 to 4000 taels, an amount equivalent to the salary of three years for a middle ranking official. (Dickinson, 1990)

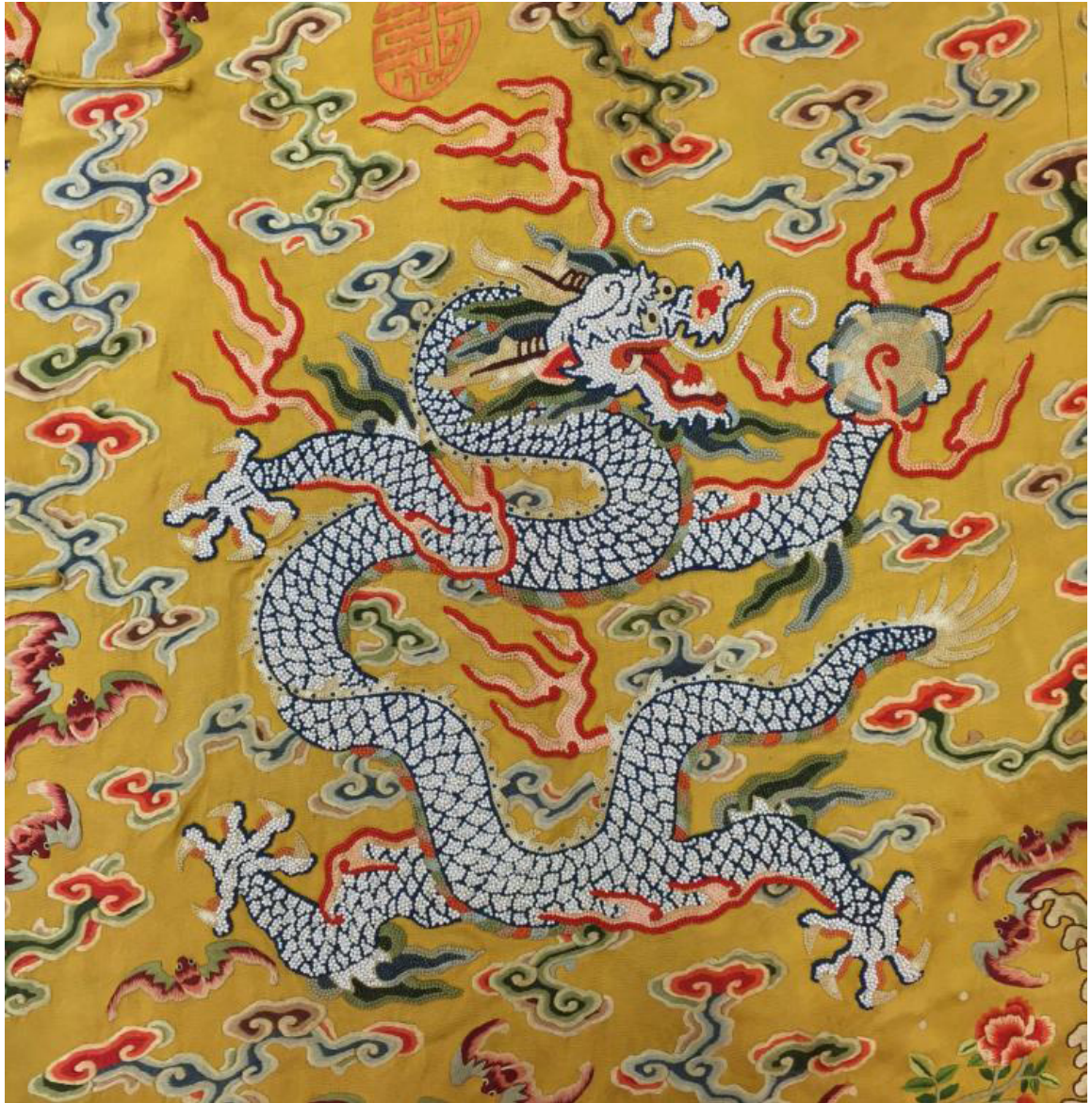


Image 7. Emboidery detail in a silk dragon robe from Qing-dynasty



Image 8.
Woman's ceremonial robe made of silk and cat fur, 19th century (MET)

3.3.3 Women's dress in Qing-dynasty

The tailoring of contemporary Western wear during late Qing-dynasty followed the human form, as dictated fashionable at certain time. This was unheard of in Chinese fashion until the beginning of the 20th century. For modesty and warmth, several layers of garments were worn simultaneously, none of them which accentuated any part of the body. (See image 8.) In Qing-dynasty garments, it was essential to cover the body for decency, as well as show the social status of the wearer with the garment they wore. (Wilson, 1990)

Qing emperors continued Ming-dynasty's system of having multiple wives, as well as many consorts. The girls chosen to become these "Excellent Women" were recruited from important military families of Manchu or Mongol origin. If chosen for the position, these women were to live in the Forbidden city, until their retirement at the age of 25. That is unless they were chosen empress and in which case, would never be able to leave the Forbidden city again. (Garrett, 1994)

Both for Manchu and Han-Chinese women, their social status was solely determined by that of their father or their husband. Therefore, little is known of the importance of imperial court robes of women until 1759. After that, women's and men's clothing had set rules for official and non-official wear. For centuries, the tailoring for both men and women remained similar. (Garrett, 1994)

Chao fu for women was a full-length garment, much like the men's corresponding dress. Chao pao constructed of a jacket and had a pleated skirt attached to the hem. Worn with Chao pao was often Chao Gua, a full-length sleeveless vest. For semi-formal events, women of imperial family wore a dragon robe, similar to the men's style. The only difference was the lack of center back and front slits, and the robes sometimes would contain more dragons. (Garrett, 1994) Sometimes women's sleeves might be wider, and the dress a slightly longer fit, but never touching the ground. (Wilson, 1986)

It is debatable, whether the Manchu-women ever adapted a skirt for their everyday use. It was mostly Han-Chinese women who used skirts, mainly pleated and in plain, kilt-like overlapping style in regard of fastening. The winter styles were padded and trimmed with fur. A Han-Chinese woman could also wear leggings or trousers underneath the skirt. Working women and children could wear trousers without the skirt, and it wasn't considered particularly strange or liberal, as it was in the contemporary western minds in the 19th century. (Wilson, 1986)

3.3.4 Women's accessories

Accessories were a common thing to complement the main dress in Qing-dynasty. The smaller items were just as important to well-dressed Chinese women as they were for their western contemporaries. (Wilson, 1990)

The Chinese robes were made without pockets, and it was neither a custom to a woman to carry a bag. Well doing women had no need to carry anything, as they were aided by servants. However, there are cases of small personal pouch discoveries, that were probably carried in secret in the ladies' sleeves. (Wilson, 1990)

The hat used by women in festivities was called Ji Guan. This resembled the emperor's winter hat, with silk tassels and a fur brim. It was topped with a pearl if the wearer was an empress, or other women given the right to wear it. Tian Ze was a lighter, alternative headdress and was shaped like an inverted basket, the framework being made of rattan and covered in jeweled ornaments. (Garrett, 1994)

Unlike for their Han-Chinese contemporaries, footbinding wasn't fashionable for Manchu women. Women of lower ranks wore flat-soled shoes with embroidered satin or silk. Women of higher status wore shoes that gave the resemblance of small feet with an elevated concave heel. (Garrett, 1994)

3.3.5 Cheongsam / Qipao

Cheongsam or qipao is a dress that has elements from Han Chinese, Manchu and Western clothing. It became popular in its modern form after the downfall of Qing-dynasty (1911). The origin of the dress is somewhat debatable. In an article about qipao's origins, Jan Skarstein, a writer for LTL Mandarin School, suggests different areas of origin of the dress, all of which can be considered correct.

The Manchu robe, chang pao, that was similar to both women and men, is suggested to be the true origin of qipao. Ruled by Manchu-tribe during Qing-dynasty, all Chinese men were made to change their Han-Chinese clothing to traditional Manchu-dress. Later it was only the government officials that were made to wear the dress by law, but even among commoners, it stayed as a popular style. Qipao was the corresponding female dress to men's chang pao. It took a longer time to gain acceptance by Han-Chinese women, as there were never legal requirements for women to change to Manchu-dress. (Skarstein, 2018)

By another theory, the qipao existed already in the Western Zhou dynasty (1046 BC-771 BC) in China. Author Yuan Jieying claims in the book *Chinese Cheongsam*, that qipao has several similarities with the dress style worn during women in Western Zhou period. There's also been noted to be similarities with qipao and a one-piece dress worn by women during the Han dynasty. By any case it is evident that the ancient Chinese dresses have possessed similar features both the Manchu-tribe's dress as well as with the qipao we recognize today. (Skarstein, 2018)

In the book, *An analysis on the origin of Qipao*, Donghua University researcher Bian Xianqiang suggests that the qipao was truly born in the period of the Republic of China, when Chinese started to accept foreign influences. During this time, China and Shanghai especially was opening up to western dress styles. Thus, qipao was constructed of both western clothing reference as well as traditional Chinese dress styles. The similarities of the one-piece dress popular among western women and qipao emphasize the connection. (Skarstein, 2018)

The Qipao saw perhaps its peak in early 20th century Shanghai. In this period, the stylish dress was noticed by American Vogue, and was featured in ads, promoting the new modernity of China (see image 9). However, by the time of World War II as well as the Chinese Civil war, the progress of Qipao was stalled. The best qipao tailors fled to Hong Kong and continued their craft there, while the Chinese Communist Party prohibited the sales of items with Chinese heritage. (Yeung, 2019)



Image 9. Vogue. May 1, 1943.

From 1940's onwards, the knotted side-fastening was transformed to be merely decorative one in favor of a more practical zipper-fastening. The length of the sleeves varied from non-existing to just above the elbow. The length of the dress has as well varied from just below to the knee to nearly floor-length, and given the narrow shape of the hem, the side slits were essential to give freedom of movement. (Yeung, 2019)

The popularity of qipao saw a second coming in Hong Kong in the 1950's to 1960's. Lighter fabrics, such as cotton and linen, were utilized in the production of qipao, as the women entering workforce needed lighter materials to work in a hot weather. The shape of the dress became more tapered from the waist, creating a slender figure much influenced by western dressmaking. After being adopted by multiple filmmakers for movie costumes during the same period, the Qipao became synonymous with the fashion of Hong Kong. (Yeung, 2019)

By 1980's, despite its popularity, the qipao could no longer compete with the Chinese' hunger for all things Western and had virtually disappeared in urban areas. (Garrett, 1994) Qipao condescended to becoming a costume for weddings as well as a uniform for waitresses, losing the elegance and mystique that it had possessed for decades. However, qipao saw a new revival in the beginning of 21st century. Chinese film director Won Kar-Wai re-introduced qipao to the popular culture in the film *In the Mood for Love* (2000), worn by actress Maggie Cheung as Mrs. Chan throughout the film. In the film, the Qipao is presented as a modern, tight-fitting dress in 1960's China, and inspired by the film, the stylish dress was adapted by a new generation. (Yeung, 2019)

3.3.6. Precious materials

Wilson V. writes in 'Chinese Dress' (1986. Page 9), that:

“ One of the chief points of reference in the Chinese garment tradition is not, as with many other cultures, the actual form of the human body but is the surface of the fabric, a surface which provides a field for a representation of the wearer's status and aspirations through formal patterning.
”

Materials are an essential part of Chinese fashion history, hence I wanted to educate myself with the materials and their meanings in the Chinese culture. Silk and the dyeing of silk as well as embroidery are two of the most distinguished materials and methods in Chinese fashion through the history. Below, there is more information of both. All the information about silk and embroidery is from the book of Liu Zhijuan 'The story of silk', from 2006.

3.3.6.1 Silk and Dyeing

Silk is one of the earliest inventions of Chinese history. It made China famous through the Silk road, which had been utilized for trade from as early as Han-dynasty (206 BC. - 220 AC.) Before 20th century, the production of silk was the main source of livelihood for women in the rural areas, whereas men took care of the transport and trade. This division of labor lasted for thousands of years in China. (Liu, 2006)

In ancient times, only officials and aristocrats were able to use silk to produce their garments. Common people used mainly linen. As certain areas grew wealthier, especially areas that produce silk such as Jiangsu and Zhejiang, merchants and other middle-class citizens would start using silk in everyday wear. (Liu, 2006)

Already during Han-dynasty, Chinese silk and clothing started to have foreign influences via the silk road. Emperor Ling (156-189) of Eastern Han Dynasty would often wear the clothing from the western regions of the silk road, as well as listen to their music. By his example, many officials of higher ranks would start wearing their clothes as well and absorb their culture. (Liu, 2006)

During Qing-dynasty, the first mechanical spooling methods were born. The production of silk saw a raise in Ming- and Qing-dynasty. Capitalist countries stole raw silk from China, while simultaneously offering cheaper, mass-produced silks for the Chinese market. This endangered the Chinese silk production. Besides clothing, silk was often used as a canvas for writings and paintings. Previous to the invention of paper in ancient China, valuable silk was utilized for texts and paintings of the most importance. (Liu, 2006)

According to the writings of the contemporaries, spring was the best time of the year to wash the silks, whereas summer and autumn were the best times for dyeing. The reason for this was the gathering of the plants needed to dye fabrics was only possible during summer and autumn. In the Warring States period, local growth was used in natural methods of dyeing.

Soaking the leaves of flowers in warm water, purple grass yielded purple dye, madder roots yielded red, oak bark and certain fruits yielded black, and the lotus three bark and yellow mast fruit yielded yellow. The colors consisted of two types: plants and minerals. (Liu, 2006)

During Yuan-dynasty, new ways of dyeing were invented. Crimson dye was produced from fine rubia roots grown in Northwestern China. Green color was ground from buckthorn. Many other colors were also yielded from mulberry bark, tea leaves, lotus husks, black beans and hazelnut skin. The spectrum of colors was extensive due to highly advanced methods of dyeing. (Liu, 2006)

The five main colors that were favored already in the Ming-dynasty – yellow, blue, red, white and black – had symbolic properties for the Manchus. Blue was the official color of the dynasty. Red was more avoided by Manchus as it represented the previous dynasty, but for Han-Chinese, it was a lucky color. White was associated with death. (Garrett, 1994)

3.3.6.2 Embroidery

If a dress' patterns weren't already weaved on the textile on the loom, the colorful motifs would be later embroidered on a plain weave fabric. Embroidery saw a rapid development throughout Qing-dynasty. In the areas focused on embroidery in China, such as Xian (currently called Hunan), embroidery was the main source of livelihood for many women. Other famous embroidery areas were Chengdu, Guangzhou and Suzhou. (Liu, 2006)

While sharing some similarities with Western embroidery, Chinese invented several special techniques for it. Usually the central seams of a garment were sewn together first, before applying the embroidery. This way the embroidered motifs and patterns could be applied to the surface to create a seamless surface. (Wilson, 1990) This is a technique I took into consideration in my own work, as I wanted to hide the seams as much as possible to create continuing surfaces.

The satin stitch was a technique in which straight parallel stitches of yarn were side by side, creating a smooth surface. The directions of the stitches were altered from motif to motif, reflecting a different play of light on the surface. The artisans of Xian created over 70 different types of stitches, with which they used to create different kind of surfaces. They also used multiple shades of thread to create a sense of depth to the embroidery work, much like painting with thread. (Liu, 2006)

Many frequent embroidered motifs, such as the motifs representing scales or flowers, were enhanced with gold thread. Said thread was rarely pure gold, but mixed with copper, silver, iron or lead. This stiffer type of yarn couldn't be sewn through the background fabric as with other types of yarn. To apply this thread, it had to be laid on the surface on the desired places, and fastened with small stitches across, often with thin yarn with a color that blended in with the golden thread. (Wilson, 1990)

Another common way of embellishing Chinese garments was appliqué. For example, flowers could be cut out of another material, their edges turned and then applied neatly to another surface with matching thread. Another type of appliqué were cut-outs, where another silk was sewn under the first layer, creating a reverse appliqué. (Wilson, 1990)

Highly important embroidery works, such as robes for the emperors and other royalty, were stitched with what has been referred to as the Forbidden Knot or Blind knot. (See image 10.) Created in the Forbidden city for imperial textiles, the technique was not meant to leave the containment of the city. This stitching technique is executed so precisely that it was said to have the embroiderer go blind. The stitch resembles a small dot that in bundles create a motif. (Wrigglesworth, 2020)

Image 10. Embroidery on a Qing-dynasty dragon robe using pearls and the Blind knot stitch



3.3.6.3 Motifs

There are several Chinese and Asian motifs for embroidery, paintings and ceramics that have remained the same for centuries. Some of the most recognizable are dragons, clouds, mountains and a stripe pattern called “standing water”. All these appear in the Imperial dragon robe and their first designs were found in a Tang-Dynasty (618-906) era Buddhist Temple. (Wilson, 1986)

The most famous symbol representing the emperor is the Five Clawed Dragon. By some writers, this motif was reserved to be used by the emperor and his family only. However, were the emperor to grant permission to an official of his choosing to wear a dragon robe as well, one of the dragon’s five claws were to be removed. Despite this, the inferior quality in which motifs of five-clawed dragons have later been found suggest a wider usage of it during the 19th century. (Wilson, 1986)

Other motifs used were linked with both Buddhism and Taoism, as well as semi-mythical characters. The most common was a combination of specific motifs known as “Eight Immortals”. These included peaches, bamboo flutes, cranes, a fan and a sword. These figures were prominently shown together to demonstrate the search of personal immortality. (Wilson, 1986)

The elements were designed in different patterns and combinations on a wide variety of types of garments. The motifs by themselves meant little but placed together they encoded a message of personal and social aims common to many, such as wealth, happiness, official position and long life. (Wilson, 1986)

Qing-dynasty military officials were divided into different ranks by wearing embroidered badges on their surcoats. Different motifs represented different ranks, for example birds were civil ranks whereas other animals represented military ranks. (Wigglesworth, 2020)

In contemporary China, certain motifs hold a specific meaning that shouldn't be taken out of context. One is the symbol for marriage, *shuangxi*, meaning double happiness. This is a symbol exclusively reserved for weddings and represents the newly married couple's joy together. In a Chinese wedding, the symbol is seen everywhere from the bridal wear to the cake, lanterns and invitations. The symbol is usually in red, as it is considered a lucky colour, or golden on red background. (Zhang, 2012)

Another symbol that is reserved for a specific use is *shou*, which means long life. This character is only used in the context of funerals, as the character connects to "longevity clothing" - something the deceased are dressed in as they are buried. It is usually a suit made of silk and has the longevity symbol all over. The color is usually white or black, but never red, because of its association with joy. On textiles it's uncommon and frowned upon to use the longevity symbol in any type of other wear or context, as it's believed not to be auspicious. (Lim, 2020)

3.4 Interactions between the East and the West

The Chinese fashion market borrowing from Western market and vice versa is by no means a modern phenomenon. The interaction between the East and the West regarding textiles and fashion has been ongoing for centuries. The exchange has been so frequent, that it's sometimes hard to pinpoint the exact origin of certain garment-types or textiles. From everyday cotton, to luxurious silk, to floral motifs and to tie-dye – many textile types can be traced back to Eastern origins.

In his book *Fashion and Orientalism* (2013), Adam Geczy, a lecturer, writer and artist, studies the exchange between Western and Asian clothing through the timespan of 500 years. He brings up the concept of *chinoiserie* among many others related to the impact of Asian influence of Western clothing.

Perhaps the first literature, in which the concept of *chinoiserie* is brought up, is an English writers John Stalker and George Parker's book *Treatise on Japanning and Varnishing* (1688). Said book examines not only oriental wear, but buildings, birds and oriental figures of Persian and Chinese origin. The book's popularity

resulted in middle-class women to begin painting oriental designs, in a style that was a mixture of the Chinese origin, as well as the women's Western education. This publication among several others were to influence the West until early 18th century. One of the most known painters to popularize chinoiserie was Jean-Baptiste Pillement (1728-1808). Paintings and others designs such as furniture upholstery and dress fabrics by Pillement were copied by many manufacturers, resulting in the spread of chinoiserie tradition. (Geczy, 2013)

As late as during early 20th century, Chinese started adapting different elements of the western preferences of dress. For instance, it hadn't been an important aesthetic concern to have two halves of an outfit match in the Qing-dynasty. The top and bottom part of a suit became more of a matching set when it came to the color scale and embroideries, as was the preference in the West. The tailoring as well became more fitted, rather than just loose, shapeless garments. (Wilson, 1990)

It can be said that the West is more in control of the image it sends to the rest of the world. Meanwhile the Orient, has had a mystic connotation to it for centuries, created and evolved through western gaze. (Geczy, 2013)

The Westernization of Chinese culture was addressed and presented in China: Through the Looking Glass in Metropolitan Museum of Art, an art exhibition created with the collaboration between The Costume Institute and The Department of Asian Art in the Met museum in New York. Artistic director of said exhibition was film maker Wong Kar Wai, who supervised the styling of everything presented in the exhibition. Presented in the exhibition were designers such as Cristobal Balenciaga, Alexander McQueen, Guo Pei, Tom Ford for Yves Saint Laurent, Marc Jacobs for Louis Vuitton, Jeanne Lanvin, Jason Wu, Dries Van Noten, John Galiano for Christian Dior (See image 12 and 13.) and Pierpaolo Piccolo for Valentino, among many others. The number of participating designers tells about the commonness for using Chinese references in western clothing design for decades if not centuries already. The exhibition was criticized for filtering Chinese culture through a Western gaze, and even though it wasn't the purpose, it ended up almost freezing an entire culture in the past. (Holpuch, 2015.)



Image 11. Jean-Baptiste Pillement. Chinoiserie, 1759.

3.5 Cultural appropriation

One of the discussions relevant to my thesis topic is one of cultural appropriation. In the fashion world, it feels like nearly everything has been an inspiration to designers in one way or another, and in a way, nothing is sacred. Today, more than ever, it seems like everything needs to be as politically correct as possible, and almost anything can be considered offensive and degrading.

Cultural appropriation can even be called 'cultural theft'. Using a completely different culture from someone's own as a starting point of a collection can be problematic. As a clothing designer, I have often come across with the dilemma of political correctness when it comes to clothing references.

In the melting pot of cultures, that the world is today, there is still an extensive amount of cases taking place in which an ethnic group is seen as exotic and something that can be freely exploited. Even if today cultures are continuously mixed, and even with the freedom of speech, defending a timid subject as this can be challenging. However, taking things from other cultures is not always a negative thing. Through borrowing from other cultures, we have for example mathematics and the calendar (The Atlantic, 2015). Without any borrowing, we would not be the society we are today. We can't stop taking inspirations from elsewhere, we just need to be more careful how we do it in today's world.

One example of the subject happened in May 2018, when an American high school student, Keziah Daum, decided to wear a traditional Chinese dress to prom. Some Asian-Americans claimed the teen wearing the cheongsam to be cultural appropriation, and an exploitation of another culture, as they feel that the value of the history of the garment is reduced when it is worn in a different context. However, many native Chinese from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, felt proud to have their traditional culture recognized and loved by other countries. A Beijing based fashion blogger Hung Huang stated that to Chinese, regardless of being a traditional dress, Qipao is not sacred or even that meaningful. (Qin, A. 2018)

Regarding the issue of cultural appropriation, it's worth noting that customary dress can originate from an attire of another culture. This is the case for an Indian aboriginal tribe The Muria of Madhya Pradesh, whose style of dress is adapted from another cultures. They mimic the fashion of Hindus with which they are in contact by trade, replenishing their own lack of dress style. All of Muria's cloth and accessories are from outsiders. (Maynard, M. 2004)

In Daum's case, many Chinese were quick to point out that Qipao was first the traditional dress of the Manchu-tribe, a minority group in China's northeast, and was later adapted by the Han Chinese. (Qin, A. 2018)



Image 12. Dress by designer John Galliano for Dior
in Spring/Summer 2003.
Vogue, May, 2015

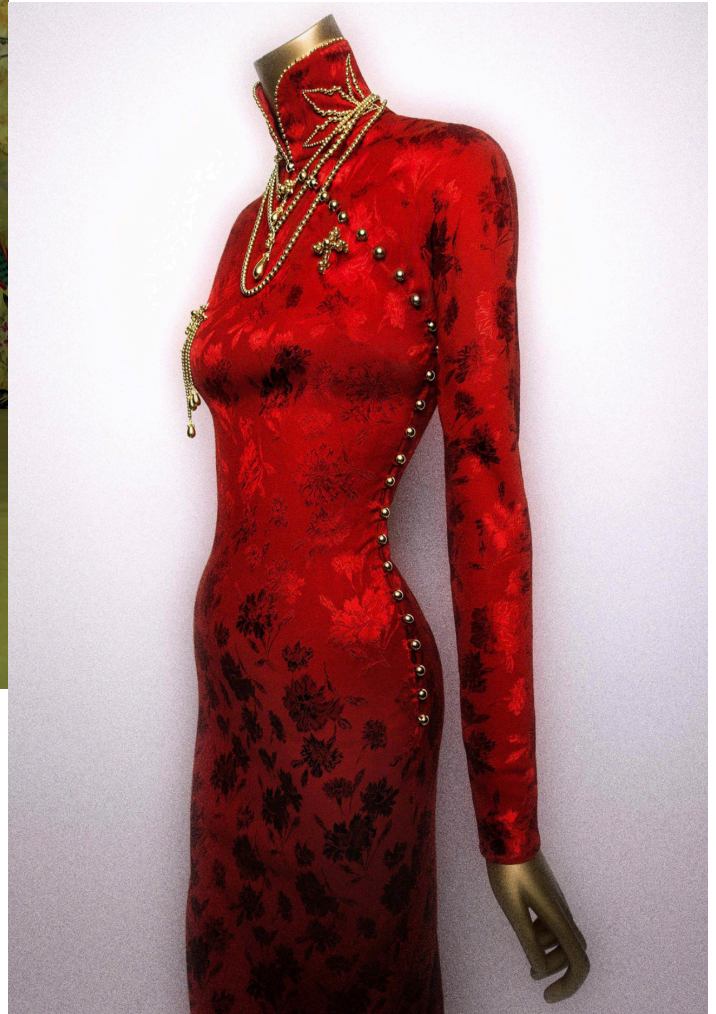


Image 13. Dress by designer John Galliano for Dior in
Fall / Winter 1997.
Vogue, May, 2015

Another article regarding cultural appropriation is from Business of Fashion, “Rihanna’s Latest Cover Provoked Cries of Cultural Appropriation, but Chinese Netizens Disagree” written by Zoe Suen. A cover of Chinese Harper’s Bazaar is addressed, where singer, actress and designer Rihanna is featured in a cover shot sporting what seems to be a dress referencing that of Chinese Tang-dynasty. (See image 14.) In said article, Suen compares the reactions of Chinese living in China to Chinese living in the west. She points out that native Chinese have a different perception of what is considered cultural appropriation and what is considered appreciation. She writes that, according to Elisa Harca, who is a co-founder and Asia chief executive in Shanghai-based digital marketing agency, the people who consider Chinese references cultural appropriation are people living abroad with Chinese ancestry. Most mainland Chinese consider it positive when the west embraces their culture. When it’s done in a tasteful way, it is often deemed appealing. (Suen, Z. 2019)

To understand how to take inspirations from other cultures in a respectful way, we need learn from those who are doing it in a correct manner. One good example was the case of Oskar Metsavaht, the founder of a Brazilian sportswear brand Osklen, who collaborated with the Asháninka tribe for their Spring 2016 collection. Osklen treated the tribe like a normal creative collaboration and gave them credit and royalties from the sales. Through the collaboration, the Asháninka tribe got more public awareness for their struggles with environmental degradation and they received money in exchange for the tribe’s motifs and concepts. The Asháninka tribe tattoos were made as a print, women’s fabric slings for carrying children inspired a crisscross shape in a dress and some of the Amazon forest animals also appeared on the garments and on the website. (The Atlantic, 2015)

Another good example is Rihanna’s gown at the MET gala in 2015 for “China: Through the Looking Glass”, and cultural appropriation was very present on the red carpet. Rihanna was wearing a dress with “imperial yellow”, which was a shade of yellow reserved for the emperor. Because the dress was made by a Beijing-based Chinese couturier Guo Pei, the dress was perfectly appropriate since it was an actual piece of design from China, by a Chinese designer. It is important to acknowledge the origins – to engage with the cultures more than only on an aesthetic level. (The Atlantic, 2015)

But how does the western and non-western dress really differ from another? Professor Jennifer Craik from RMIT University suggest in her book *The Face of Fashion* that Western and non-Western dress should not be necessarily regarded as opposites, as the elements from traditional or “ethnic” dresses from both cultures are being adopted to rework and reformulate new forms of clothing. It is not only the Western taking inspiration from the East, but vice versa. (Craik, J. 1994)

As we can see, the cultural appropriation is not only in the garment itself – a lot of it comes after the collection is already designed and produced. All the communication that is done afterwards, is playing a major role as well, whether it’s the advertisement, catwalks or PR. Cultural appropriation has to be taken into account in every step of the process, from designing all the way to the end customer.



Image 14. Rihanna on the cover of Harper's Bazaar China.
(Suen, Z. 2019)

3.6 Contemporary fashion design in China

The status of contemporary Chinese fashion designers has been addressed in a *High Snobiety* article by Alec Leach called “Why Haven’t Chinese Designers Taken Over the World Yet?” (2017). In said article, Leach brings up the conflicts about the current fashion market in China. While a growing amount of the world’s luxury products are purchased by Chinese customers, Chinese generally still don’t seem to be interested in the design products potentially offered by native Chinese designers. Leach writes that;

“Chinese designers aren’t short on talent or skill—many of them have trained at the world’s most prestigious design schools—but the biggest problem they face is that, broadly speaking, China isn’t interested in its own brands. The government and state-controlled media would have you believe that the country is destined to one day usurp the West, but culturally speaking, the general public fawns over imports from Europe and America.” (Leach, 2017)

This phenomenon can be seen throughout Shanghai; from department store-size fake markets, to high-end clothing stores and to the way the majority dress in the streets of Shanghai. With the enormous cultural history of China, with so many fascinating visual starting points to contemporary designers, Chinese designers seem to be ignoring their own heritage. Leach brings up in his article the missing vision of contemporary Chinese designers, comparing them to Japanese labels that have been successful by “reworking blueprints set by the West to create something new and exciting.” He also brings up the case of Russian designer Gosha Rubchinskiy, who “has done the same with his quintessentially Russian take on streetwear, again to huge success. The Chinese designers you see showing in Paris, New York and London are certainly not bad, but they’ve not managed to really wow the world with an authentic story.” (Leach, 2017)

The stigma of the phrase “Made in China” was recently addressed by a Chinese designer Feng Chen in her spring/summer 2018 fashion show. (Image 16.) She used the said phrase printed with big letters on her garments, underlining her heritage in a proud way. Rightfully so, as China produces most of even western luxury brands’ goods, with excellent quality (Carter, 2017).



Image 15. Shoestore in Shanghai,
May 2018

However, the problem of the lack of intellectual property rights is still very present in China. With Chinese consumers' desire for newest European styles, combined with the efficiency of the production of goods in China, you get a thriving market for counterfeit products. The most desired and most copied brands include Supreme, Gucci, Off-White and Balenciaga, and you see these logos (or a variation of it, i.e. Galenciaga) on every other consumer on the streets. As a fake product is easy to access for person of any income, many Chinese consumers seem to simply not care about the authenticity of the products they buy. Wealthier and more socially conscious Chinese prefer to shop abroad as it is more of a guarantee to get the authentic product.

I noticed the very same thing during my internship. Majority of Chinese designers know the purchase culture in China, and as a result copy Western trends as it is easy to make and guaranteed to sell. They are thinking short-term and aren't thinking about the long-term impact of their designs or building any kind of legacy.

To end this part of contemporary fashion in China, I wanted to conclude it with a quote from Leach's article, which explains the situation quite well:

"China is a mysterious, exotic place, one with a deeply complex history and culture. It's got the talent, the ambitions, and the infrastructure to create some truly global brands, but in order to really make it, the country needs to tell a story – and it can only do that by looking in, not out."
(Leach, 2018)



Image 16. Feng Chen SS18
(Carter, 2017)

3.7 Plastic waste

During my internship in China, witnessing plastic pollution was unavoidable walking in the streets of Shanghai. I came to notice this going on my everyday errands - the street markets are filled with plastic goods in the form of toys, souvenirs and clothing. Almost everything is either made of plastic, or worse yet, both made from plastic and then wrapped in plastic. Sometimes the items are wrapped in plastic, then bound together in another layer of plastic.

Walking in a department store of tiny stalls selling clothes, I saw floors filled with piles of plastic bags the clothing has arrived to the store in. Getting a coffee, the Chinese clerk would put the take-away cup in a small plastic bag for easy carrying. In a restaurant, the plates and cutlery were often vacuum-packed in plastic for each customer, to create the illusion of being new and clean (which they weren't. Locals would tear the plastic wrap off the utensils and then proceed to wash them themselves before eating off them.) For many Chinese, the overuse of plastic didn't seem to cause a guilty conscience. It was seen as an everyday occurrence and even necessity.

Disposable plastics is a fairly new problem, since it was invented in the late 19th century and reached mass market use in 1950. Today, only 1/5 of all the plastic waste gets recycled – everything else ends up in the landfills, and some of it in the sea. It is still unclear how long does it take for plastic to completely biodegrade, but the estimate is from 450 years to never. (Parker, 2018.)

As we can see from the image 19, the production of plastic has increased more and more each decade and a big part of it is disposed in less than six months. Plastic in the oceans and on the shores is estimated to kill millions of marine animals annually. In addition, some of the animals are harmed either visibly or invisibly – be it six-pack rings around their necks or eaten micro-plastic in their stomach, it is not good for them in any measure. (Parker, 2018.)



Image 17. Take-away coffee in Shanghai, May 2018.



Image 18. In Life magazine in 1955, an American family celebrates the dawn of "Throwaway Living", thanks in part to disposable plastics. (Parker, 2018)

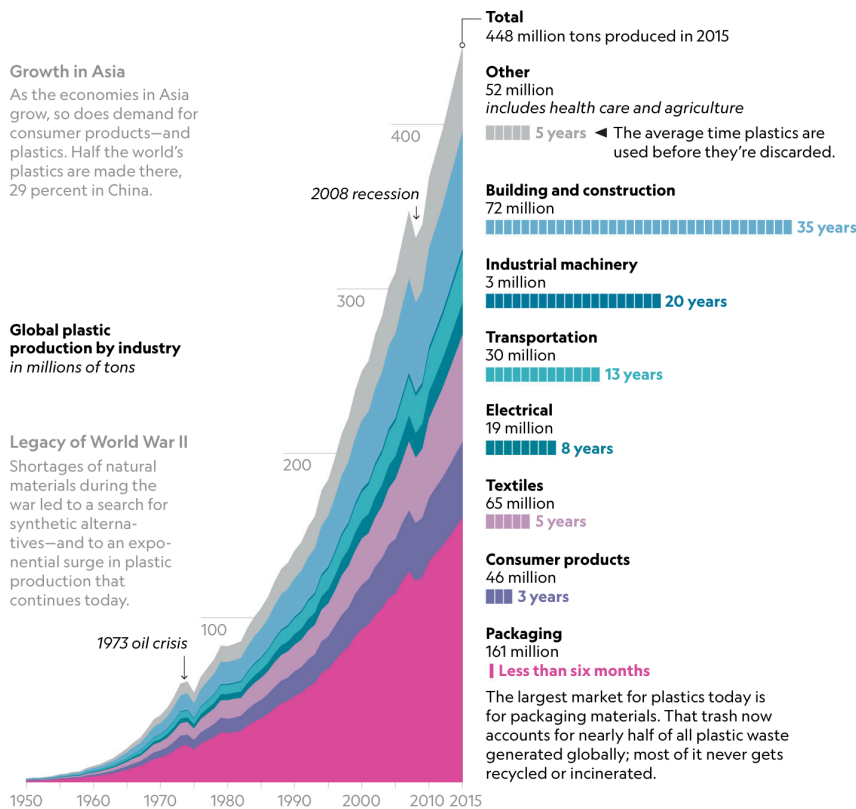


Image 19 – Global plastic production by industry (The Wall Street Journal)

The reason people love plastic so much is that it has actually helped us in many ways. Plastic has made cars and airplanes lighter, saving fuel and pollution. We are able to deliver clean water to people in need and we are able to extend the life of fresh food. Plastic has also saved wildlife by replacing ivory in piano keys, billiard balls and combs. (Parker, 2018.)

Not so long ago, in 1955, disposable plastic was celebrated worldwide. (Image 18.) Back then, no one could estimate the impact it has on our environment. Now, around 40 % of plastic produced is disposable. This means 448 million tons of plastic going to garbage as fast as couple of minutes after purchase. (Parker, 2018.)

By many statistics, China produces the most plastic waste in the world. Already in 2010, a chart created by The Wall Street Journal shows that China has by far the most mismanaged plastic waste ending up in the ocean. In one year alone, 8.8 million metric tons came from China in the form of plastic bags, bottles and other plastic trash, 3.53 million metric tons of it ending up in the global waters. (McCarthy, 2019.)

If the plastic waste growth is as steep as it is in the image 20, we don't stand a chance against this problem. As a fashion designer it is also my duty not to create garments that would contribute to the current issue. It is time to become more ethical and sustainable in every aspect of our daily lives.

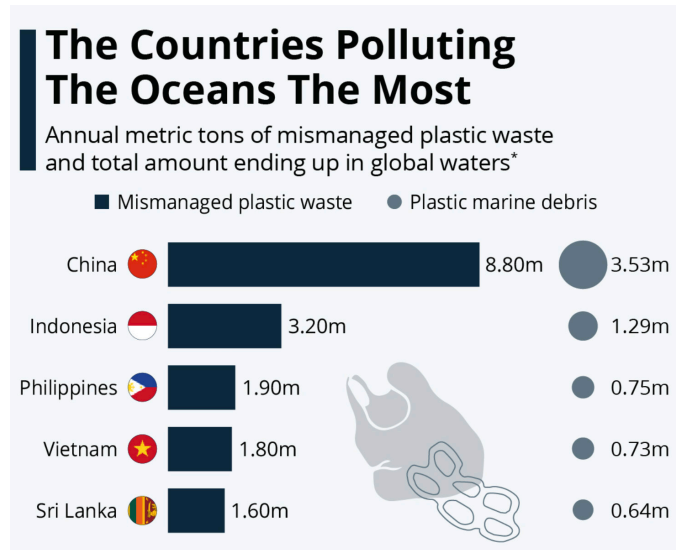
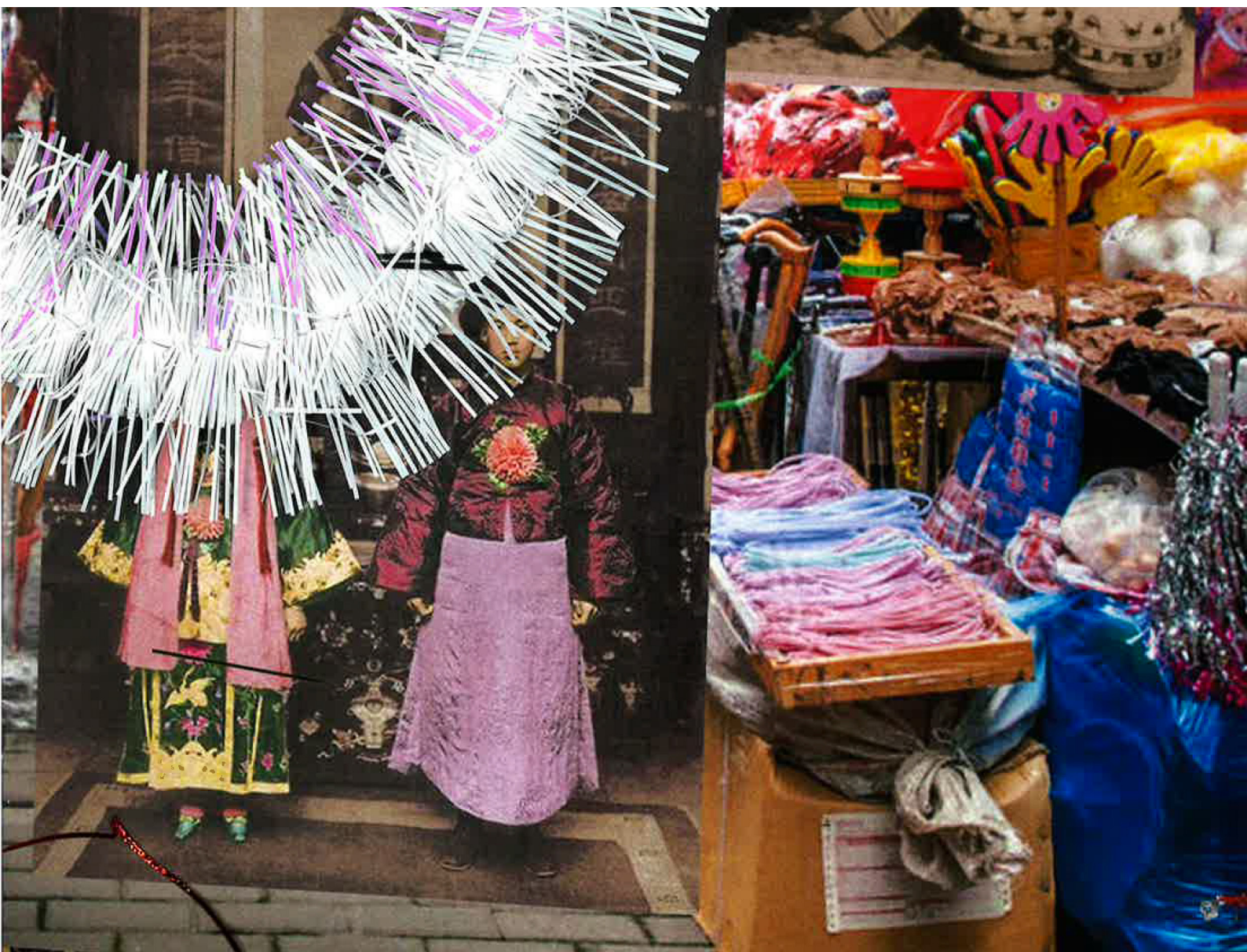


Image 20. The countries polluting the oceans the most in 2010





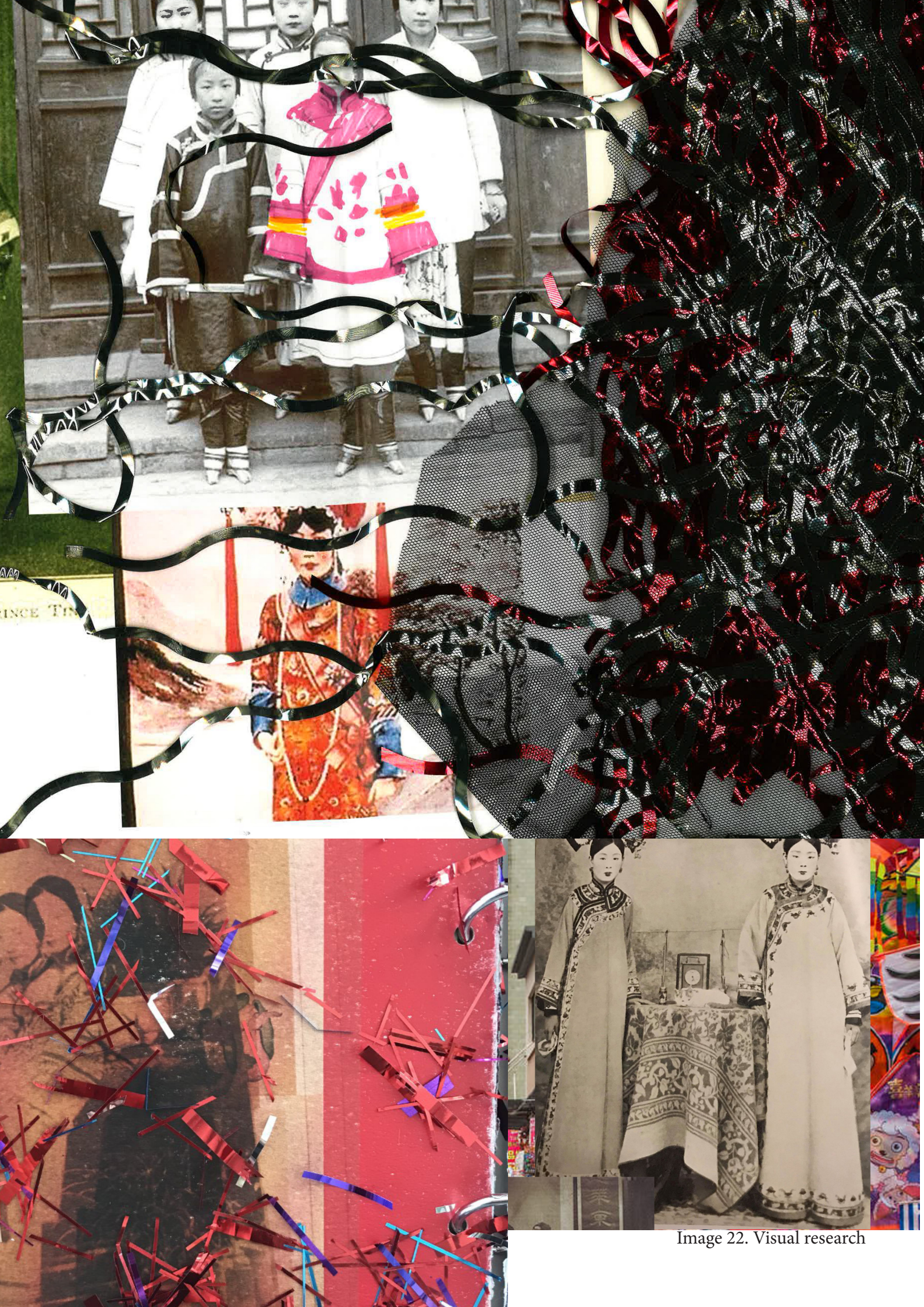


Image 22. Visual research

4.

The Design Problem

The problem of my design in this collection is how to incorporate Chinese traditions and culture in a collection of a western fashion student without exploiting the foreign culture, considering the cultural appropriation and making sure that the heritage is not wrongly interpreted. I wanted to be able to mix Eastern and Western cultures and create something new and appreciated. I also wanted to address the problem of image of the Chinese garments. 'Made in China' labels have bad reputation, so in this collection I wanted to show how Chinese culture and aesthetics can be used to make a fashion collection.

In addition, I want to include the plastic waste problem of China and make something beautiful from something that has such negative connotations nowadays. In the future, we need to be able to either stop using plastic altogether or find ways to recycle the material effectively. As a young fashion designer, I see this as one of my obligations – to be able to create sustainable fashion.

5.

Design Methods

To realize this collection concept, I designed and produced a womenswear collection. I chose womenswear because it's something I'm more familiar with, and as most of my inspiration for this collection came from women. I designed the collection to visually represent China, both historical and contemporary, as well as me and my aesthetics as a designer. To produce the collection, I first made visual research, sketching, draping, pattern making, prototyping and sewing of the final garments. This whole process took approximately 8 months from start to finish.

5.1 Visual inspiration

Chinese art in all forms has been a big influence on the pieces realized for my thesis collection. In my collection research, I looked into not only Qing-dynasty era clothing, but also paintings, objects and people. For me, an inspiring protagonist – even a fictional one – is a useful, concrete starting point for a collection. In this collection, I chose both a real person, as well as a fictional one, but with similar stories.



Looking into the Chinese history, the story of the last empress of China caught my eye and my imagination. Xuantong, or Aisin-Gioro Puyi, who was the final emperor of China, chose to marry Gobulo Wanrong, an educated woman from an esteemed family. For the 16-year old woman, the title “empress” however became a shackle, both mentally and physically. She became trapped in the marvelous Forbidden City, her only liberation becoming self-destruction. Besides her, the emperor had other wives, and to ease her loneliness, Wanrong became addicted to opium. The down spiral continued, when the Qing-dynasty ended and even though Puyi kept his title as the emperor, he no longer had any political power in the Republic of China. Later imprisoned, Wanrong dies alone at the age of 39, discarded and forgotten. (Lim, 2018)

Another visual starting point for my concept was Chinese director Zhang Yimou’s movie *Raise the Red Lantern* (Dà Hóng Denglong Gaogao Guà, 1991), which is based on a novel by Su Tong called ‘Wives and Concubines’. Said movie tells the story of a young woman Songlian, who is chosen to be a fourth wife to a wealthy older man in 1920’s Republic of China. The



Image 24. Wanrong, the last empress of China, (1906 - 1946)

movie begins with her being treated like a royalty in her new household; receiving luxurious massages and being attended to by the husband. As the movie progresses, she discovers that said treatment is not a given, but something to be competed of with all the other wives of the house. To keep the attention to herself, she feigns pregnancy, but her lie is revealed by the third wife. In her desperation, she herself exposes the discreet infidelity of the third wife, who in consequence is hanged. Witnessing all this unfold, it leaves Songlian emotionally traumatized.

Visually, the movie is filled with vibrant colors, consisting mainly of red and blue, and with a strong distressing atmosphere. The beautiful cinematography emphasizes the luxurious setting of the movie, while the plot contrasts with the miserable game of the wives of the palace. The fictional story of the film has similarities with the real-life events of empress Wanrong. The female protagonist of the film is chosen to a position considered lucky by many other; she lives in an environment filled with beauty and wealth, but it is like a stage in a theater.



Image 25. Raise the Red Lantern, 1991 by Zhang Yimou.



Image 26. Early sketches

These two stories have a similar theme of false beauty. I built my collection concept with the theme behind these stories - to create something visually beautiful, but with a false-valuable content. I see Chinese culture with this same idea. For me, Chinese culture and historical China - be it architecture, art, or clothing - is visually fascinating and brilliant. But the contemporary Chinese culture I witnessed was filled with false beauty. Shiny and valuable-looking things aren't what they seem - most being copies of something with European design origins. So even if something seems beautiful and rich at first glance, is in fact something with empty value.

5.2 Sketching

The first sketches were materialized after I was finished with creating my collection concept. As my interests lie in textile- and surface-design, I start most projects with the research of materials. My first idea was to use traditional Chinese fabrics such as silks and jacquards, and to make fabrics that transition from beautiful to ugly. One fabric experiment consisted of a jacquard with a melted Christmas tinsel-ornament on top, which lead to experimenting with recycled tinsels.

After a general idea of the materials, I started free sketching based on the visual materials I have gathered. Sketching and draping go hand-in-hand in all of my projects, and my thesis collection was no exception. First it was trials with flowy silks, and as the ideas in the sketches became clearer, I moved to toiles with stiffer materials. To get all the ideas I had on paper, I made a hundred sketches. I drew everything by hand, and by scanning the sketches, added color and textures on a computer to visualize them better.



Image 27. Sketches

5.3 Prototypes

I decided from the beginning that I wanted to keep the silhouettes quite recognizable and simple. For a mid-critic of the collection, a toile stood out with its simplicity. The rest of the toiles would be based on the same shape. The silhouette came from the simple yet strong shapes of the traditional dress of the Manchu-tribe, later adapted as modern Qipao. Looking at old photographs of Qing-dynasty Chinese wear as well as Empress Wanrong's wardrobe, it gave the general direction of the style and the volume of the collection garments. I looked into the simple patterns of a Manchu-robe and started prototyping from these dresses as a base.



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5.4 Materials

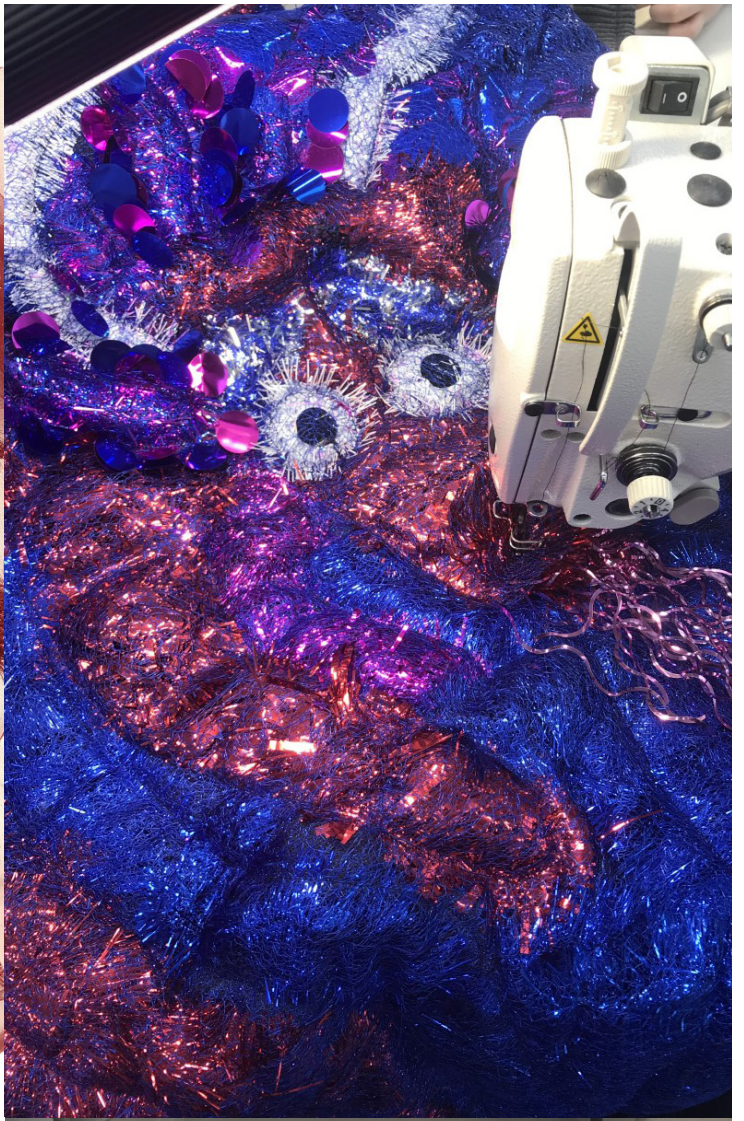
Concentration of the surface rather than the form of the garment was one of the starting points in interpreting the traditional Chinese dress into a contemporary one. My first idea for the materials was to clearly reference the traditional Chinese garments of the late 19th century. I made material trials with painted silk and velvet, hand-embroidered heavy satins and even wool and denim. The fabric manipulations were all inspired from classical Chinese prints and the imperial dragon robe motifs. With the technique of woven gold in mind, I experimented with padded and heavily 3D-things embroidered on top of a fabric. In the mid-critic, my variety of materials were narrowed down to two; padded material with tinsel embroidery, as well as thick wool knit with tinsel in between. The two choices of material as well as a simple silhouette made the collection more coherent.

The final materials were created with four layers, a padded layer, a top fabric, tinsel filling and a layer of tulle to keep it together. The material I used was padded only lightly, as the surface filled with tinsels created thickness in itself. The materials are quilted together, using different patterns of over stitching. The stitching patterns were unique in almost all of the garments, and all the patterns, colors and imagery used in the tinsel surfaces were taken from the dragon robes of the emperor in late Qing-dynasty. This gave the garments the illusion of a subtle print, without having many recognizable characters, apart from the dragon motif in few garments.

The knitted garments created a soft contrast to the stiff, bell-shaped tinsel garments in the collection. The knit dress and the top- and skirt combination are handknitted from a thick wool yarn. I decided to use single type knit, as the knit was to have tinsels all over as well, so the base was to be quite simple. All garments were knitted with 15-millimeter knitting needles to create big, fluffy loops.

The idea of incorporating plastic in garments came from the streets of Shanghai, as I helplessly witnessed the immense amount of it every day there. I decided to use tinsel, as it was easy to manipulate in multiple ways – and to have it recycled or as a production left-over material. I contacted a Finnish Christmas ornament factory Weiste, and they were happy to be a part of the collection. They sponsored all the tinsel material apart from some I had acquired earlier already. The materials utilized in the collection were dead-stock tinsels as well as tinsel production cutting waste. Using a limited amount of material, as well as limited amount of colors for each piece, was an interesting challenge.

Next page clockwise: Image 29. Surface design process.
Image 30. Sewing process.
Image 31. A pattern piece of a dress
Image 32. An unfinished garment



5.5 Patterns

All the patterns for the garments in the collection are virtually based off on one early toile I made for the collection mid-critic. This was a simple prototype dress with a semi-fitted shape and a zipper running all the way from the neckline down the right side-seam, imitating the qipao closing system. This dress was a starting point for the rest of the looks. An early idea for the collection was to have a fitted, short dress to start off from, and gradually having the silhouette grow wider in each look. This was somewhat achieved. I first made a few basic patterns with a slim fit (as slim as a padded material could be) and made trials with increasing width on the garment. The challenge was to see how well the padded fabric could keep its shape before needing external support to hold it. For the simpler shapes, like the A-lined skirts and the jacket and a short dress, only one layer of padding was needed to keep the shape. With the much more sizable two dresses in the collection, an extra layer of pleated wadding was added to the hips, as well as a metal hoop in the hem to keep an oval shape. What furthermore helped to keep the shapes was sewing tinsels over the seams to cover them, creating extra support as well as smoothness in the surface.

5.6 Colours

The main focus on the collection was on the silhouette and textures, so I never deemed colors particularly important. The color scheme was decided quite late in the collection making process. Majority of the time, I had all the colors in the world to consider, as I didn't want to limit myself when the research images provided so many brilliant colors to choose from. For the final line-up sketches, each look was made of mostly one color, the primary colors used in Qing-dynasty clothing, creating a sort of rainbow of colors. This remained as a starting point, but the colors changed in the production part, depending on the availability of each color. I was limited by what I got as a free left-over tinsel, so I made do with what I had. The only colors I slightly avoided were black and white, which are associated to mourning wear in Chinese culture. As a result, I used all bright colors that were available, but with some focus on red and blue, as all the knit pieces were. The idea of red and blue as dominating colors was taken from the visuals of the movie *Raise the Red Lantern*, as well as being considered imperial colors.

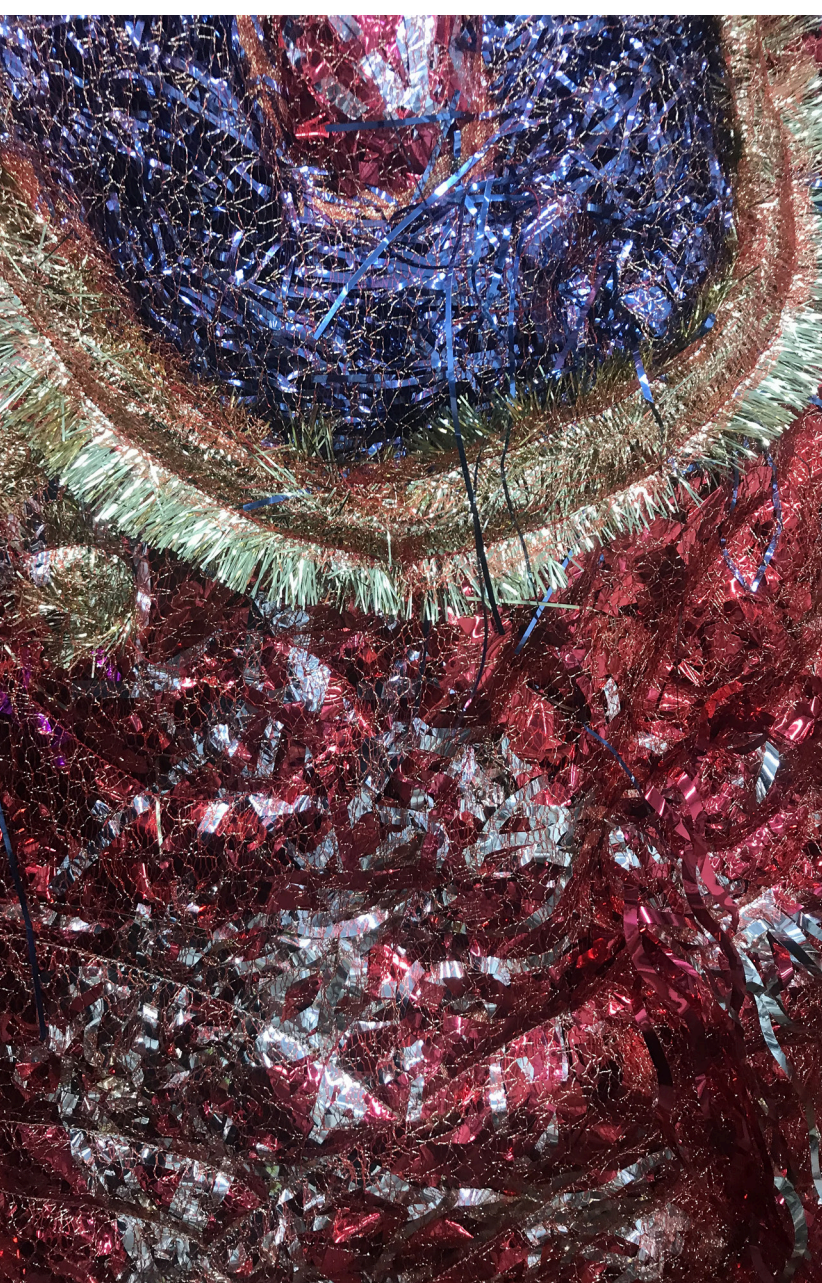


Image 33. Detail of a dress' surface



Image 34. Reverse side of a prototype dress



Image 35. Prototypes



5.7 Accessories

In addition to garments, the collection also has a chunky knitted beanie in each look, as well as knitted legwarmers with similar style. The beanie was inspired by a large headpiece of a Qing-dynasty empress, and it also gives a contemporary and youthful look for the collection. The tinsel-covered slippers were cut from padded boots, and were paired with knitted legwarmers, the shape of which was to imitate that of a Qing-dynasty boot.

6.

The results

The result is a collection of 27 pieces, including accessories, in 6 total looks. The collection was produced mostly in Spring 2019, and finished in May 2019, and was presented in Näytös19, the annual fashion show in Aalto University. (Image 38). In September 2019 the collection was presented in Aalto Graduates showroom in Paris. In November 2019 the first look of the collection was exhibited in Dutch Design Week in New Order of Fashion's exhibition titled "The End Is Near."



Image 36. A look from the finished collection displayed in an exhibition.



Image 38. Backstage in Näytös19.

6.1 The collection

The first look of the collection gives out the feeling of Qing-dynasty dress perhaps more than any other look. (Image 39.) The silhouette is a direct reference to the style of garments used in late 19th century China. The colors are also slightly mis-matched, which wasn't uncommon in the Qing-dynasty. The look consists of a knitted red beanie, with knitted red legwarmers and slippers with tinsel surface, a tinsel-coated jacket and a skirt.

The pattern for the oversize jacket came from Manchu-tribe's style of top, much like in Cheongcham. The sleeves are wide with a subtle horse-hoof shape. The coat is fastened with a zipper, going from the right side-seam to the middle, and ending on a high-collar. The collar can be raised up, or it can be slightly open to reveal a rib-knit lining. The collar shape is a reference to a pilot-jacket, to give the coat a more contemporary look. The main colors for the coat are red, blue, and silver, the red edges being made out of cutting waste.

The skirt is slightly flared and over the knees, with a zipper fastening all the way in the right-side seam. The skirt is mostly made out of silver left-over decorative plastic yarn, and the skirt has a twisting dragon motif in green.



Image 39. Look 1. Näytös 19. Model Helena Aavik.



Image 40. Look 2. Model Pipsa Hurmerinta.

The second outfit of the collection is a total knit look. (Image 40.) The top has a similar pattern as the jacket in look 1, excluding the high-rise collar and with a bit narrower shape. The sleeves are wide, with a dropped shoulder. A zipper runs from the right side-seam to the right side of the neckline. The skirt is likewise constructed with a similar pattern to the skirt in look 1, with a zipper on the right-side seam. Both knitted garments have tinsels twisted between the loops in the knit, in random patterns like a twirling dragon, and with round, dragon-eye motifs. As with other looks, this one also has a blue knitted beanie, as well as matching legwarmers and tinsel-slippers.



Image 41. Look 3. Model Arina Baranova.

The third look of the collection is fairly similar to the second look. (Image 41) The pattern for the dress is constructed using a combination of both the top part as well as the skirt seen in look 2. The also has a zipper in the right-side seam, with a small rib-knit collar. Similarly, with the other looks, the outfit has a matching red knit beanie and red knit legwarmers, made of the same wool knit as the dress itself. The dress is decorated with tinsels looped all around it in random patterns, that resemble a twirling dragon or perhaps peonies in the Imperial garden.



Image 42. Look 4. Model Ruusa Vuori.

The fourth look in the collection consists of a semi-fitted short sleeveless dress and a skirt, both made out of padded tinsel material. (Image 42.) The dress has a similar zipper in the front as all other looks in the collection, with a simple round neckline. The skirt is almost the same shape as the one in look 1, only slightly longer. The tinsel surface in the dress consists of twirling pieces of tinsel, with black protruding flowers, or perhaps dragon eyes. The placements of the tinsels in the skirt are a subtle nod to the prints in the Imperial court skirts. The fourth look has same accessories as the previous looks.



Image 43. Look 5. Model Charlotta Ahonen.

The fifth look is a large blue coat-like dress made out of padded tinsel. (Image 42.) The shape is taken from the dress in look 4, only made wider and longer, with added sleeves and a collar. The dress has multiple vertical seams to create the round shape, all of which are hidden under layers of tinsel. The collar of the dress is similar to that of the jacket in look 1, with a similar zipper going in the right-side. The shape of the wide sleeves follow the bell-shape of the dress. With a dominating color of blue, the dress has a red tinsel-made print of a dragon encircling the garment. The dress has partial extra wadding, and a metal hoop in the hem of the skirt to keep the shape. The dress is accessorized with a blue knit beanie, as well as blue legwarmers and tinsel slippers.



Image 44. Look 6. Model Sanna Saastamoinen-Barrois.

The sixth and final look of the collection is the largest dress in the collection, with a distinct bell-shape. (Image 44.) It has a similar pattern to the dress in look 5, the only difference it being slightly wider, longer and sleeveless. Similarly, as in the previous look, the dress has multiple vertical seams to create a round shape, and all seams are covered with tinsel to create a continuing surface around the garment. The dress has a round neckline and a zipper similarly placed with all the other looks. The main color in the tinsel-filled material is red, with some yellow, orange and blue. The stitching pattern in the dress resembles the prints and motif in an emperor's dragon robe, with wave-motifs in the bottom, clouds, mountains, and a dragon. The look has as well a red beanie, red legwarmers and tinsel covered slippers.



Image 45. Look 3 shot backstage in Näytös 19

Next page: Image 46. Look 2 in Näytös 19





An extra look for the collection was produced in collaboration with Diesel Helsinki. (Image 47.) The collaboration was done so that Diesel provided a jacket and jeans, which were customized according to the collection concept. The look consists of denim jacket and jeans, which are both covered in tinsel in similar manner as the garments in the collection. The jean jacket has a similar zipper as the other looks, from center front to the right side-seam. The jacket has an image of a dragon in the back. The jeans have, unlike the skirts in the collection, a zipper on both sides on the trouser legs. This modified outfit was presented in Näytös19 before the fashion show.



Image 47. Diesel Look in Näytös 19



6.2 Analysis of the results

I consider the final outcome of the collection to be close to what my expectations were in the beginning of the process. The idea from the beginning was to have a visually loud collection with strong shapes and runway-worthy, pompous use of textiles and colors. This, I believe, was achieved.

Coming up with the collection concept took perhaps more time than any other phase in the collection making process. Using a foreign culture as a starting point for a collection was a challenge, as there was so much cultural information to examine, with both historical and contemporary aspects. In retrospect, I feel like narrowing down the timeframe which I go through in my thesis would have helped to get a wider knowledge on each subject. However, the end product i.e. the clothing collection is the result of all this information absorbed, and it's hard to say which subjects affected some of my unconscious decisions. Nevertheless, I believe the concept idea of the collection is quite straightforward and timely and hope that the garments convey the message behind it.

To stick within the timeframe, especially being a bit late in the collection process at all times, I had to make some fast decisions. Admittedly, some decisions in the production phase of the collection were hastier than I had planned, and I wasn't entirely pleased with the results. For instance, all the zippers in the collection were meant to be metallic and clearly visible, to bring a contemporary and even sporty look for the garments. Due to the time limit before the fashion show, in which the finished collection would be presented, I had to settle for plastic zippers that were hidden with a fabric flap and press button fastening. Hiding the zipper seemed to invalidate its purpose.

Another thing I had to compromise due to the lack of time were accessories. I had originally planned to have more of them to complete the outfits, such as stockings. The plan had also been to make more 3D-elements to the surfaces of the textiles such as wadded flowers, but this was dropped as well.

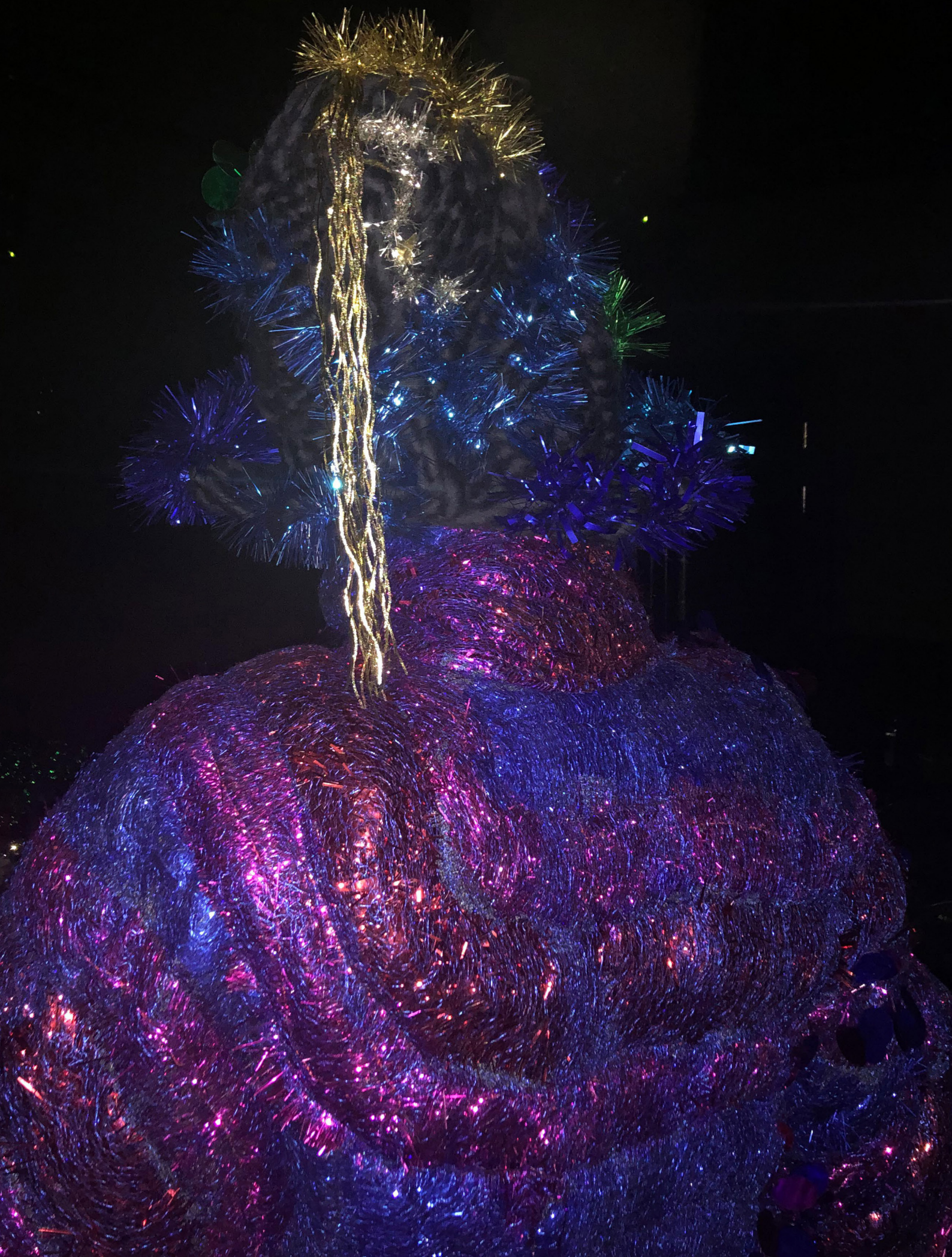
If I had had a more coherent idea for the collection from earlier on, I might have realized the materials for the collection differently. Had I known what kind of idea I would be using for my thesis collection in China already, I would have gathered the plastic waste with me, at least some of it. I might've even used shiny plastic waste found in Finland. It would have been an interesting challenge to use material as unconventional as plastic trash, and to make it look like anything but.

The material choice as it is now in the collection is a rather subtle reference to the theme of plastic waste, and reminds the viewer more of Christmas, as expected when seeing tinsel ornaments. In that way the current way of realizing the materials for the collection misleads from the idea behind it. I feel as though the use of tinsel dominates the entire collection visually, and somehow takes away from the historical Chinese references I planted within. Then again, another fear of mine in the beginning of the project was to have a too literal China-themed collection, and the possibility of it becoming something of a costume, rather than a contemporary collection. So, in this way, using Christmas ornaments gives the collection another dimension, with Christmas being as a concept a western thing, but the shiny plastic tinsels somehow reminding of China all the same.



Image 50. Collection lookbook page

Next page: Image 51. Detail of a dress



Conclusion

The finished collection reflected the research topic in different ways. In my opinion, I succeeded in making something new and interesting, as well as visually appealing, from references taken from another culture. In the collection, I incorporated classical and recognizable Chinese visual elements, without the intention of exploiting the Chinese culture. My main idea had been to design something very Chinese, both in form, print and colors. I didn't use elements considered sacred or otherwise important to the original context to avoid cultural appropriation.

I had intended to add to the designs more contemporary clothing elements, to make the individual pieces slightly more wearable. As it is, it's rather delicate material-wise, and close to being unwearable in normal use. However, the intention for the collection was never to make a commercial one.

Furthermore, I had intended to take into account the problem of excess waste - plastic in particular - which is especially present in China. In the production, I wanted to focus on as little newly bought material as I could and minimize any cutting waste. This resulted in countless visits to the fabric store to only buy what I need at certain times, instead of buying fabrics in bulks, which might result in excess material I wouldn't need. There was some fabric waste however, when I simply ran out of time to produce all the pieces I had first intended to make for the collection. All the donated plastic tinsels were used efficiently.

All the garments were carefully constructed by making the surfaces as I was sewing the garments together. It was a slow and deliberate method of making garments. I paid in mind the types of traditional Chinese hand embroidery, and some detailed parts were sewn by hand in the garment. The amount of time used to work on each surface made it valuable, even if the material was cheap itself. By focusing on only a few pieces at a time, the production of the clothing was more focused on individual designs rather than producing quantity of clothes over quality. As I am not a talented seamstress, this also gave some room for mistakes and improvising with the design as I went along. This method felt like making an haute-couture garment, or like creating a painting, rather than just another meaningless product to wear.

The collection shows the visuals and working methods I wanted it to and thus, I consider it a good collection. However, with more time and some more deliberate decision making, it could have been an excellent collection. As it is in work life as well, everything has a deadline and you can only do the best with what time and resources you have. Nonetheless, the most important things that I learned was making a schedule in a demanding time limit, to learn quick decision making and to make compromises. Besides this, I took into consideration how to use another culture's heritage in a respectful way, and generally I learned a lot about myself as a designer.



Image 52. Detail of a dress

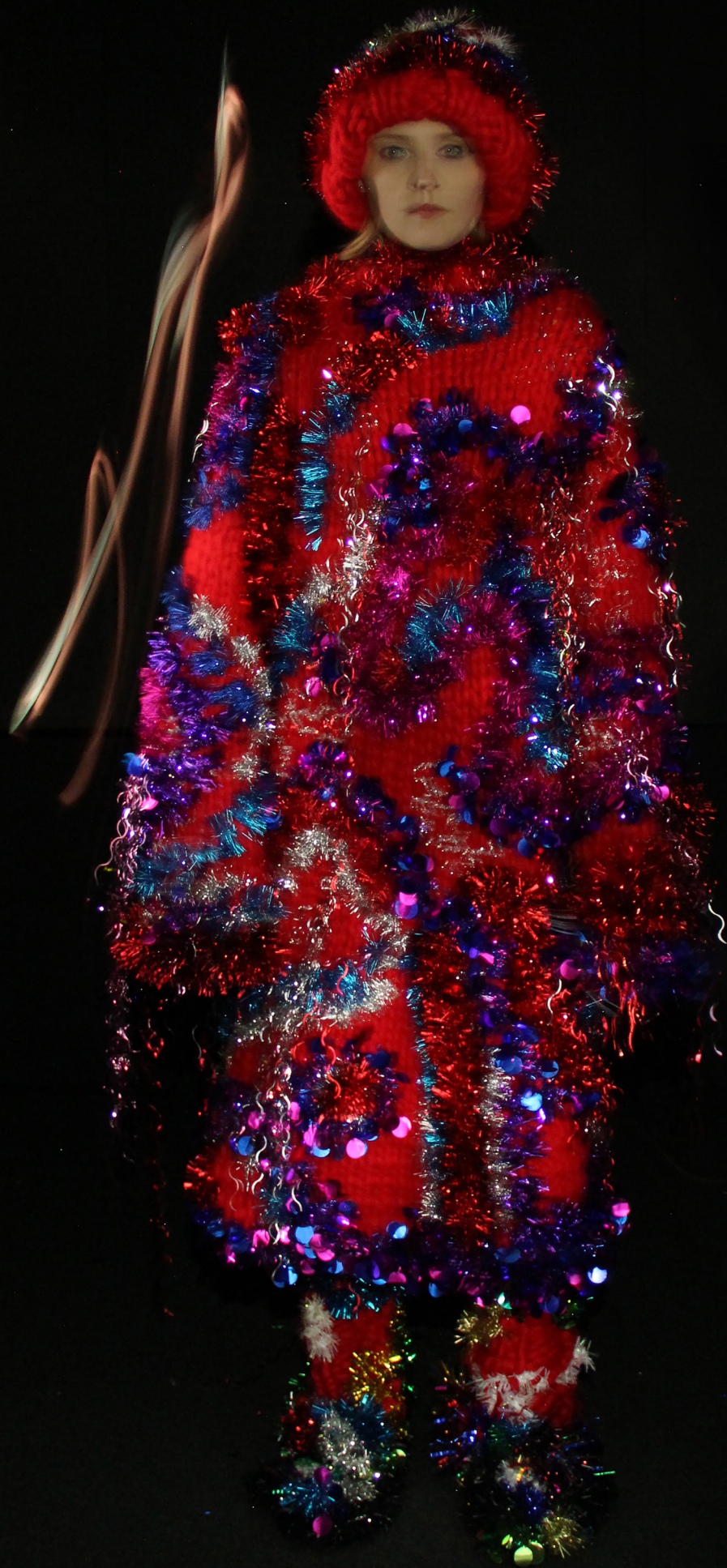
Next pages: Images 53-58 Graduation collection lookbook



















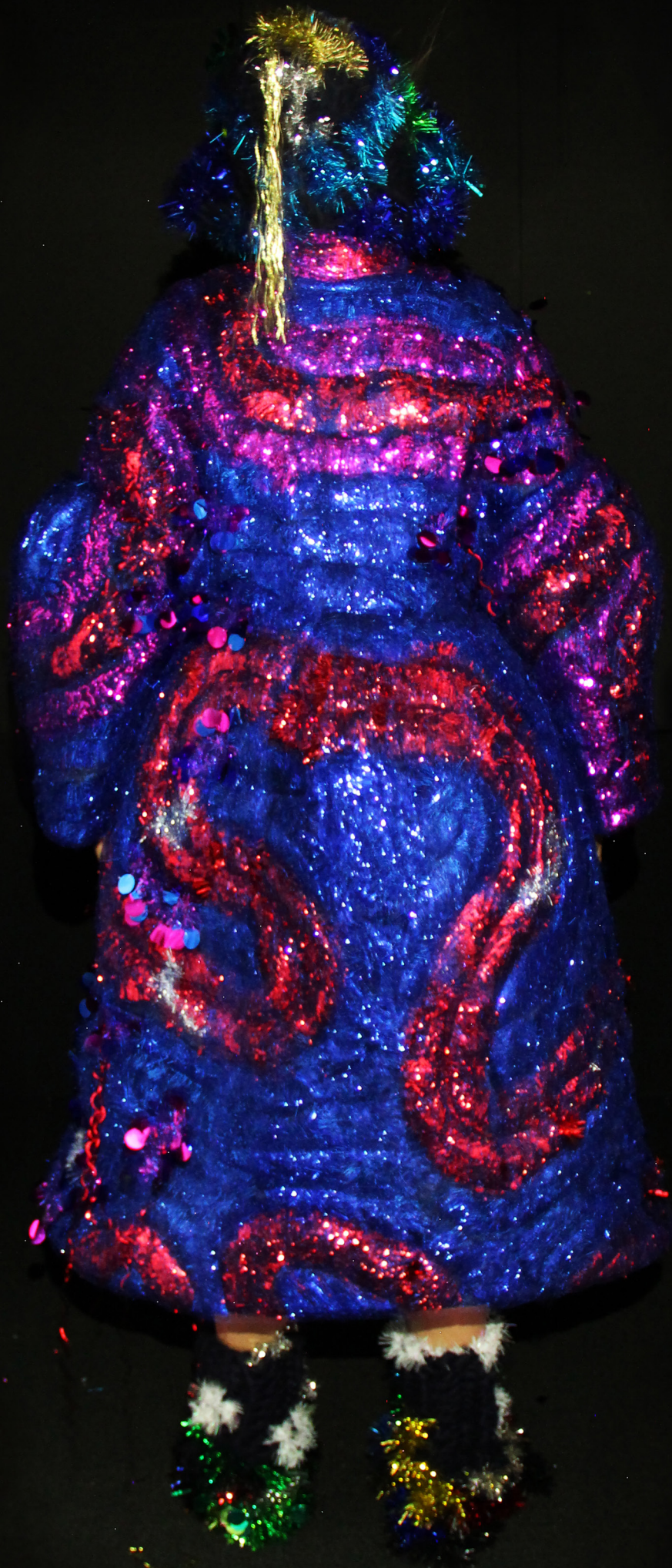








Image 59. Collection line-up

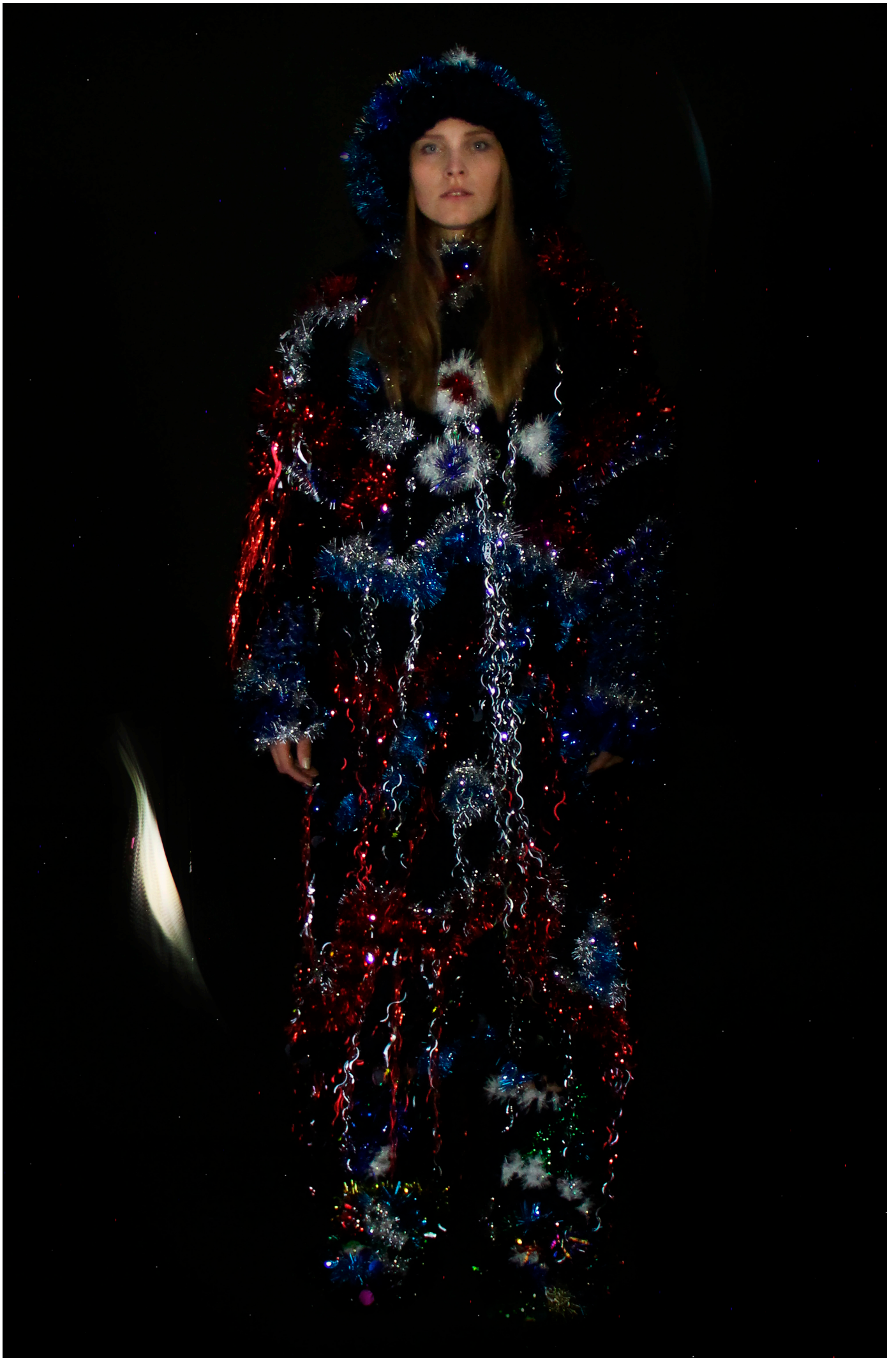
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39-44.

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49.

Backstage in Näytös 19. Photography by Julia Montin

50.

Collection lookbook page

51-52.

Dress details, photography by Julia Montin, model Anette Montin

53-60.

Lookbook pictures, photography by Julia Montin, model Anette Montin

